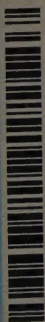


HIS OTHER WIFE

By
Roy Vickers



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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

John Corbeyne, financier and future Cabinet Minister, had divorced his first wife under a misapprehension of facts. Meanwhile he has married Sylvia Corbeyne. His first wife, to regain her reputation, threatens to reopen the case if he will not accept her as his wife. John Corbeyne disappears. A financial crisis compels him to return into public life. What happens when some opponents discover his position and exposure seems inevitable, makes a story of real grip and interest.

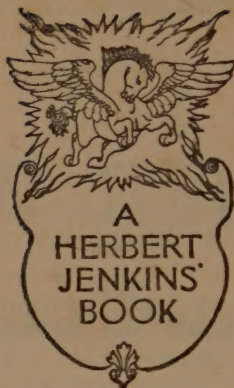
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BY
ROY VICKERS

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HIS OTHER WIFE

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF CORBEYNE

CORBEYNE HOUSE, in the words of the Estate Agents' circular in which it had appeared some half a dozen times during the last century, was a "stately Tudor Mansion overlooking St. James's Park." It had been built to the order of John Corbeyne, a banker of note in Elizabeth's time. A later Corbeyne had refused accommodation to James II, with the indirect result that it was not until the beginning of the present year that a John Corbeyne once again stood in the house of his fathers.

Nineteen years ago John Corbeyne had been a penniless undergraduate without even the prospect of taking a degree. Three months ago he had paid thirty thousand pounds for the outright purchase of Corbeyne House. It had been finance, of course, the trade of his fathers—plied on much the same principles. There was not a shareholder in the country who wanted anything of John Corbeyne but permission to participate in his next venture.

Amongst the many personal assets that had made him the most constructive financier of the day not the least had been his physical appearance. He was not a

bit like the traditional financier. A stranger might have guessed him to be an advocate, an actor even, but for his bushy moustache. A big man, with that supple heaviness that suggests the rowing blue; a good forehead, wiry black hair that made him look ten years younger than his age; heavy-lidded eyes, wide-set, of a dull grey-blue; regular features that might have been classical but for a leanness about the cheeks. A face that was not unhappy, but a face that had known sorrow.

He was sitting at the desk in his study, skimming a long, foreign telegram. The door opened and the man-servant entered with a sheaf of early evening papers.

"Tea is served, sir. And Lord Carfax is here."

"Right, Woodhams! Say I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

He caught at the first paper and glanced at the political headlines. He had not sought a political life. Politics had, as it were, reached out and caught him. There was work crying to be done that he knew he could do. Arrangements had already been made for his unopposed return as a Member in order that he might take a portfolio as the first Minister of Credit.

Presently the corner of his eye caught a headline that had nothing to do with politics.

"PEER-CRIMINAL DIES IN PRISON.

"JAMES CARVICK—LORD HENRY GRAUNHAM.

"DEATHBED REVELATION OF IDENTITY.

"(From Our Own Correspondent.)"

"An extraordinary human document has been brought to light by the deathbed confession of an inmate of Parkhurst Prison, whose name, according to the prison register, was James Carvick—a name which

is now known beyond all possibility of doubt to have been an *alias* for Lord Henry Graunham, whose disappearance twelve years ago was the talk of Clubland, which he had scandalised by his dissolute manner of living. Lord Henry, it is now apparent, absconded during his bankruptcy proceedings and, under his chosen *alias*, pursued a career of minor crime for which he received from time to time terms of imprisonment of varying duration. Until he declared it himself to the prison chaplain his identity was never suspected."

The house telephone buzzed. John Corbeyne picked up the receiver.

"Aren't you coming, dear?" said the voice of his wife. "Jim is in a hurry."

"Coming right away," he answered with a forced cheerfulness.

He dropped the paper, stared at it for an instant, then, with a shrug of the shoulders, hurried to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER II

HIS WIFE

"**S**ORRY, Sylvia! Sorry, Carfax! Come to bully me?"

"Yes, I have," was the emphatic answer.

"No, no more tea, Sylvia, thanks. Loathe tea, really, but always drink it—your doing, that, I expect. How d'you manage it?"

Lord Carfax twinkled. It was an involuntary, quite youthful twinkle which managed to convey an intricately subtle flattery. It held not only the suggestion that Sylvia Corbeyne's blend of tea was the only one Lord Carfax could be induced to consume, but also that she, of all London's hostesses, was great enough to be told that her guest loathed the refreshment she provided. And the gay lift of Sylvia's eyebrows said that the artistry of all this was noted and appreciated.

Corbeyne, watching them, grinned. Sylvia had been Carfax's ward till some years before her marriage, and the idea of Carfax ever having been given the responsibility for Sylvia still made Corbeyne grin.

Carfax swung back to business.

"The Kingsway," he announced abruptly. "I've booked you for lunch there to-morrow. You're the guest of honour."

Corbeyne nodded grimly and fortified himself with tea-cake.

"Is Sylvia coming?" he asked.

"My dear fellow, it's a club," protested Carfax. "I do wish you'd try——"

"Long job?"

"You'll get away about three," replied Carfax testily. "You will have to be careful how you talk to them. They're ticklish. A City crowd for the most part! The personal element—that's your strong suit with them. Give 'em a bit of biography."

Corbeyne scowled and then glanced at his wife. This time her smile held reassurances for him alone. Nevertheless:

"You're confoundedly indelicate, Carfax," he grumbled.

"Oh, my dear chap, I don't mean *that*. Besides, if I did, no one minds *that* nowadays. You're old-fashioned. What I mean is, tell 'em of your early struggles. A pound a week and find your own travelling expenses."

"I never earned less than two hundred a year," said Corbeyne perversely.

"There you go!" exclaimed Carfax. "What's the good of two hundred a year! A pound a week you started at, my boy, and don't you forget it. You've got to be personal. If you can manage to drop an 'h' or two, it won't do any harm. It's a pity you're a born speaker; a shade of awkwardness now and then goes such a long way——"

Lord Carfax warmed to the elaboration of his campaign. He had gained his peerage through advertisement on a big scale, and he was never so active as when he was propagating. Better than anyone else he could propagate anything of which he did not actively disapprove. At present he was engaged in propagating the new governmental idea of a Ministry of Credit.

He had early picked on John Corbeyne, whom he had long known. The fact that Corbeyne's wife had been his own ward had genuinely had nothing to do with it.

It happened that his personal conviction, his patriotism, and his quite considerable sense of humanity were one with his duty, and so Lord Carfax had carried everything before him. He had filled the whole country (including the Cabinet, to whom he had explained the wonders of their own idea) with the conviction that the golden key, as it were, to European prosperity, was contained in the person of one man.

The one man, with the utmost good temper, was at the moment, ignoring him. Corbeyne had such a profound belief in his friend's abilities that he considered his own assistance in the publicity scheme quite unnecessary. Instead of listening, he contemplated his wife.

Her lips still held their smile. It was an elusive, friendly, amused little upward-curving of what might otherwise have been too firm a mouth for a woman. In her eyes, also, the laughter lingered, softening the intensity of their blue. Yet, even in this happy moment, it was as though some flame, some whisper of combat, born in her, had armed her, in spite of her laughing protests, with strength and endurance and a keen, high courage. Involuntarily her supple grace suggested that of a rapier, her hair a golden shield, the lift of her small head the raising of a banner.

As always, this essence of her touched a chord in her husband's brain and set it thrilling until it was a relief to forget the challenge of her and reflect only upon the lure; the delicacy of feature, the lashes long and unexpectedly dark, the arched brows and hands of almost sculptured fineness. . . .

"Good Lord, it's past five! I must be off. Sylvia, my dear, tell him all I've just been saying when and if you can. You *may* have been listening; he certainly hasn't. Oh, and have him ready by one-fifteen sharp to-morrow. And see that he gets up those Russian figures. He'll have to talk about them next Thursday to the Prime Minister."

Corbeyne roused himself. Lord Carfax was bustling off. His cheery, restless instructions to Sylvia continued long after the bend in the staircase had obliterated him from the upper hall.

"Funny old dear, isn't he?" murmured Sylvia, as Corbeyne returned to the drawing-room. "What were you thinking about while he was here, John?"

"He's a clever man, but he talks an awful lot of rot," evaded Corbeyne. "I suppose I'd better go and slog at those Russian figures."

"But I want to know what you were thinking about instead of listening to his clever rot," persisted Sylvia holding him by the coat-lapels. The soft brilliance of her recreated the thrill of a moment ago.

"I was thinking entirely about you," answered Corbeyne simply.

Her hands stole up from his coat and, with butterfly lightness, caressed his face. Then she released him, and watched him stride out of the beautiful room.

Her eyes retained their tenderness, but her thoughts had grown sharp and bright. They ran:

"He never gets absorbed in me like that unless he's been thinking about *her*. Now what should have made him think about her to-day?"

CHAPTER III

HIS CHILD

BACK in his study John Corbeyne took up the looseleaf portfolio containing the Russian figures, dropped into an armchair, and settled himself to study them.

Half an hour passed, and he realised that he was merely reading the report. His attention was wholly unconcentrated.

PEER-CRIMINAL DIES IN PRISON

Hang it all! He must pull himself together. It was common knowledge that the Prime Minister was a genius at figures—

The door opened. Corbeyne knew who was opening it and returned his gaze to the portfolio. Sylvia came quietly in and sat on the arm of his chair.

"What's troubling you?" she asked.

It was uncanny the way she could tell when he was not working and wanted to, he thought! She could tell when he was lying awake at night, too. . . .

"Nothing."

"Play fair!" she said in his ear. "Own up."

He grunted like a sulky schoolboy.

"Then I'll own up first," she volunteered. "My question was a draw, a blind, a tactful lead, and deserves to be dismissed as such. Because I've seen the paper, too, and I know what's troubling you."

"Oh, you do? You are a darling, Sylvia."

"Yes. John—it's no concern of ours, is it?—that paragraph." She settled herself more securely by slipping an arm round his shoulders.

"No . . . no concern of ours." He contrived to laugh. "'A grim reminder of his shadowed past', as I saw on one of those cinema posters yesterday. Conventional sentimentality on my part! That's all, really."

An old, carved mirror opposite his desk showed him that she looked puzzled and faintly disturbed.

"Sentimentality?" she echoed. "You told me that he abandoned her—almost at once."

"He did," assented Corbeyne quickly. "That's the only element in the whole thing that gets me sometimes. If he had loved her it would have been all right. As it is—I would have liked to be able to assure myself that at least she had him to compensate her for the misery I must have caused her."

"That sounds quite like the cinema poster," she said, smoothing the wrinkles on his brow. "You'll be saying next that you ill-treated her, and then I shall laugh . . . You'd better talk about it."

Sylvia was profound. With her it was always better to talk about it. He had made the discovery of that fact even before he had married her, and every time he rediscovered it he was startled afresh. Odd that the one thing he had never yet talked to her about should be his first marriage.

"It was the year I had to come down from the 'Varsity," he began. "I was nineteen, and she was the same age. Both of us chock full of romance! I was steeped in Ovid and Lucullus, and she—well, it used to call itself 'The Paper for the Engaged Girl.' I didn't like it, but—I thought I loved her very much and was prepared to stick it. Her weakness flattered my strength. Also, there was a very eligible man, years older, who was genuinely anxious to marry her. She turned him down for me. No doubt about the

honesty of her love at that time! I reminded myself of that—very constantly—during the seven odd years of our married life.

“We were more or less happy for about four years. She was of the acquiescent type—always agreeing with me. I began to grasp that ninety per cent. of my conversation was really unintelligible to her. I’m not accusing myself of taunting her. I never did. But as soon as the mutual glamour had burnt itself out—I bored her. There was very little money, and—endless mountains of work. I was frequently from home on business—and I daresay the intervals tended to lengthen.”

Corbeyne paused ruminatively. He felt Sylvia’s light weight press more closely against his arm, and her fingers tighten loyally round his other shoulder. The old, old gratitude to her for the clean, stinging happiness she brought, rushed through him afresh.

“She used to pretend to be frightened of me, Sylvia. I’ll swear she wasn’t, really. Why should she be? She knew I detested the rôle of browbeating tyrant, as any man would; and she would work up scenes to repeat to the neighbours. And then she would lie awake all night and cry and be too ill to see to breakfast in the morning—and that didn’t improve *my* nerves. This is all beastly sordid, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But it’s all far off now, my dear. Tell me about the divorce.”

“As I began to make money she accumulated a crowd of her own. That fellow, Lord Henry Graunham, was amongst them. I was driven to having her watched. When the chance came, I took it.

“The decree was made absolute when I was twenty-nine. She defended the action—but the fellow didn’t even turn up in Court to tell a gentlemanly lie about it. I learnt that he left her immediately after I had taken the first step and that she had lost touch with him. So I made her an allowance, five hundred a year—it’s

paid regularly through my bank. The only condition I made was that she should change her name by Deed Poll. She may have married since then. I never inquired."

"Did she deny—infidelity?"

"Yes. Why she denied it I can't guess. She must have wanted our marriage to end. I wonder they didn't prosecute her for perjury. It was an absolutely clear case. He took a furnished cottage for her in Kent—there was his receipt for the rent in advance. There were letters making arrangements. Papers were served on him in the cottage itself. She hadn't the ghost of a chance of proving her denial."

He frowned over his memories. Then—

"Well, anyway, I had dismissed her from my mind until I met you when I was—let's see——"

"Thirty-three."

"I remember thinking that you would be sure to shrink from me when I told you, Sylvia."

"Did I shrink from you?"

"No, thank God."

Her nearness thanked him. She turned his face up to hers and let her lips thank him also. Then she slipped away from him.

"Leave the old Russians for a bit, and come and say good-night to the Jobber," she commanded, pulling him by the hands.

She kept his hands, and sustained the semblance of dragging him up the stairs to the nursery. That was another point where she was very profound, thought Corbeyne. Sylvia could be so very young, and she could be middle-aged whenever she wanted to. And she was only twenty-eight. How wonderful she would be when she was old!

The Jobber had obligingly finished his bath by the time they arrived. He was wearing the pyjamas peculiar to his age, which finish at the toes and seem to have no perceptible beginning. An ideal outfit for romping.

"Well, you tow-headed young scoundrel!" remarked Corbeyne. "Put 'em up!"

A boxing-match followed. The smiling nurse withdrew, and Sylvia retreated to the high fender whence she contributed impartial applause. Corbeyne was quite good at boxing with the Jobber.

"It's no good just letting a kid pommel you," he dogmatised to Sylvia, while engaging the attention of the Jobber. "Teaches them nothing. Must have a dramatic suspense. *Wah!* That's a good 'un! It should be just possible—with great effort—for them to land you one on the nose. Hullo, what's the matter, Woodhams?"

"The telephone, please, sir."

"Who is it?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't gather, sir. Shall I inquire?"

"No, I'd better go down. Finish, Jobber! Good-night!"

CHAPTER IV

HIS OTHER WIFE

“CORBEYNE speaking.”

“Mr. John Corbeyne?” came the cautious voice of a woman.

There was a pause. Corbeyne, very grim about the jaws, was telling himself that he did not recognise the voice, that he was mistaken.

“Yes, yes, John Corbeyne.” His apprehension drove him into impatience. “Who are you?”

“Kathie.”

The impatience hardened to anger. What abominable taste to use the affectionate diminutive of her name in such circumstances!

“May I ask why you are breaking our agreement?”

He heard her gasp, and realised that he was barking at her. The old controlled exasperation against her seized him.

“What is it you want?” he repeated more calmly.

“I want to see you. I absolutely *must* see you. I—it’s a matter of the most vital importance.”

Of vital importance! He remembered the phrase of old. She would use it for any urgent triviality.

“Look here, Katherine, I don’t want to be rude, but you’re not playing the game. There can’t be anything of great importance between us. You must surely see that it is very undesirable for us to meet.”

“It *is* important, most desperately, for *me* anyway, though of course——”

He knew she was going to say that her most desperate need could not be expected to interest *him*. He cut in—

"Then say it now, please, or write it. The letter will be forwarded through the bank. Mark the envelope 'Private' and I'll write them I'm expecting a letter."

"No." He supposed that she was crying—a nauseating weapon, tears. But, instead, her voice came quite cool and collected, as though at last the dialogue had reached a point she had rehearsed.

"John, I haven't spoken to you nor written to you for ten years, though I've often wanted to. Won't that make you believe it's not—something silly? I have taken a private sitting-room at the Parnassus. You can be here in three minutes. I admit I'm breaking the agreement. Be generous and come."

That was surprisingly sane for Katherine. Corbeyne's irritation ebbed a little. After all, generosity doesn't begin and end with giving money.

"Oh, very well, I'll come," he said. "Do I ask for you by—er—name? Mrs. Brierly, isn't it?"

The telephone recorded the faint vibration of a bitter laugh. The bitterness was so very audible that Corbeyne suspected the laugh of being highly theatrical.

"I never changed my name again, John."

Corbeyne banged down the receiver and went out of the room. He was picking up his hat when Sylvia came downstairs.

"The Jobber is a little excited," she said. "I don't think bed-time is ideal for a romp." She looked at the hat and said nothing.

"I shall be back in about half an hour," he said. It would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to tell her where he was going. How slim and fragrant she was, in that clinging blue-grey thing.

"In about half an hour," he repeated, and hurried from the house.

Sylvia would wonder why he had not mentioned where he was going, he thought, as he strode towards the Parnassus. Well, of course, he would tell her when he came back. But he had not wished to talk about it just then. Was he going to accuse himself of deceiving her? He was in a state of nervous ill-temper by the time he reached the hotel.

"Mrs. Brierly is expecting me in her sitting-room," he told the reception clerk, and was presently taken there.

On the way up in the lift he wondered why she had chosen the Parnassus. She could not be staying there on five hundred a year. As likely as not she had chosen it for a setting. Perhaps she needed an artistically furnished room for whatever little scene she had planned.

He broke his train of thought. It was not very fair to go and see her in that spirit.

"Mr. Corbeyne, madam."

CHAPTER V

DECREE ABSOLUTE?

CORBEYNE looked inquiringly round the room as the door closed behind him. It was the conventional hotel sitting-room, but shadowy with the long, friendly shadows of late afternoon. His eyes strayed to the window.

"Ah! How d'you do, Katherine?"

She was sitting on the window-seat. In this position, her face was all but indistinguishable and the strong golden light behind her brought out a queer blue-purple tone in her hair. Unbidden, the recollection flashed upon Corbeyne that she had often manœuvred the sunlight behind her, so as to bring the purple glow into her raven-black hair.

"How are you, John? Sit down, do, and smoke."

Corbeyne winced and obeyed. The intonation, more than the accent, was wrong. Had he never noticed it in the old days? And this affection of weakness—drooped head, loosely-clasped hands, uncertain voice and the rest of it. It was all vaguely familiar, but, after Sylvia's frank comradeship, more than a little ridiculous. He rebelled instinctively.

"Do you mind sitting somewhere else?" he asked her curtly. "I find it difficult to talk to someone I can't see properly. Short sight, I daresay."

Her immediate, silent obedience surprised him; then, noting her cringing movement as she huddled herself into a chair, the exaggerated timidity of her

glance at him, he remembered her pose of old. Heavens, how she brought back the dark years, poor fool! It had been her one and only inspiration in their married life: to fray his nerves, to drive him from weariness to remonstrance, from remonstrance to wild anger, by pretence that he terrorised her. At first simulated for the neighbours' benefit, it had at last become second nature to her. She would act the weak and trembling captive, panic-driven, until in very truth he felt that he could have used physical force upon her. . . .

And she had never lost it! Incredible! She had armed herself with the grotesque weapon as he entered. . . . He stared at her, contemptuously curious where once he had been maddened into protest.

She was taller than he remembered; of Sylvia's height and of far heavier build. She held herself badly in deference to her rôle of crouching, cowering, pathetic, misunderstood woman, forlorn in her exile. She was pale, too, but Corbeyne suspected the pallor. Powder, wasn't it? If she were really pale her lips would be less red. Even her eyes she had touched up a little. A pity, for in their grey depths lurked the ghost of all she might have been.

She raised her eyes to him now with the fluttering of lashes that had always registered, in her opinion, the fear of the brute that had spurned her. Corbeyne shifted his position impatiently.

"Well, Katherine?"

With what was obviously meant to be a brave effort, she came to the point.

"Have you seen the evening papers yet, John?"

"Oh! So you wanted to speak about Graunham!" he exclaimed. "Odd that I didn't connect the two ideas. Yes, I've seen the papers."

She nodded and shuddered. It was a very violent shudder. It would have entertained the Jobber.

"It was a bit of an eye-opener to me—that *alias* of his," she said. "I heard about it this morning from

a friend of mine in the Press. I went to make inquiries. There's absolutely no doubt. Jim Carvick and Lord Henry Graunham *were* one and the same."

Corbeyne waited. While he was waiting he observed her dress. Black—rather too transparent. Naturally she *would* choose black in which to meet again—how would "The Paper for the Engaged Girl" put it? Ah, yes—"the man to whom she had once been all in all!"

She was opening her bag. She handed him a type-written slip. Corbeyne took it and held it with an air of irrelevance, as one holds things to oblige a conjurer.

"Those are the previous convictions of James Carvick *alias* Lord Henry Graunham," she said. "Or no—it's the other way about, isn't it?" She laughed unnecessarily and he detected genuine nervousness in the sound. Had she a purpose then beneath the tedious staginess to which she clung so hard?

With a slight shrug he studied the list. It consisted of half-a-dozen dates against which were written various terms of imprisonment. She had surely not dragged him there merely to gloat over the records of Graunham?

"H'm! In and out of prison, apparently! A pretty hopeless kind of rotter!" he remarked with cold distaste, and was forced to add: "I beg your pardon—I hope I have not hurt your feelings!"

She laughed again, and again he decided that her laugh held a fear of him that was quite apart from her exaggerated pretence of timidity. She laughed as a gambler might, who stakes a fortune. . . . She seemed to have dropped the part of hapless victim for a moment.

"Look at the second conviction, John."

He looked at it.

"Three years penal servitude in nineteen hun——" he interrupted himself. "Eleven years ago, isn't it?" he added.

"Yes." She hunched her shoulders in a way that reminded him of a crouching cat. "Eleven years ago Lord Henry Graunham under the name of James Carvick got three years penal servitude—in August, that was. September of the same year was the month I was s'posed to have been unfaithful to you with him. And you got your divorce on that!"

Corbeyne looked at the typewritten paper again. He frowned. Something wrong somewhere! He searched for the error and could not find it. He glanced at Katherine. She had abandoned the beaten wife attitude; an excitement he could not yet fathom had driven her out of it for the moment. When she spoke again it was fast and clearly, as though she had learnt her statements by heart, or been coached in them. . . . While one side of John Corbeyne's brain grappled with the facts she flung at him, another side was recording that strong impression—that she had been told to say what she was saying. . . .

"I gave my oath I hadn't been unfaithful, John, but your lawyers played tricks with my evidence and the verdict went against me. In other words, those brilliant lawyers found that I was living in Kent with a man who was in Parkhurst Prison at the time. You were all quite certain about it. You proved to your own satisfaction that he was with me. Now at last, I can prove that he was *not*."

Corbeyne let the slip of paper flutter to the ground. She had been well taught, commented that impartial something in him. She spoke with a metallic confidence; beastly, but better than that silly gasping voice she used in order to indicate dread.

The rest of him contemplated stupidly the fact that Graunham had not been with her in Kent, but in Parkhurst Prison. Not in Kent, but in Parkhurst Prison. Not in——

"Will you deny that you were ever unfaithful with—anyone?" he heard himself ask at last.

"I deny it absolutely."

"Have you forgotten those letters of his?"

"I haven't forgotten anything." She had raised her voice in her eagerness to confute him. It was shrill, jarred him inexpressibly. "He and I planned to go there all right. There wasn't any mistake about our plans. Only, they didn't come off. And what's more, I can prove they didn't, *now*."

Corbeyne began to pace the room. His brain was clearing; it was weighing her and her story.

"Just listen to me, Katherine," he said. "My lawyers put in those letters of his, planning your joint sojourn in the cottage in Kent. They put in his rent receipt. There were a number of other minor facts all pointing to your intentions. You went to the cottage on a proved date—I think it was September 14th. Three days later an agent, employed by my solicitors, by name Shrager, called at the cottage and served papers on Lord Henry Graunham and yourself."

"You'll excuse *me*, John, but he *swore* that he served them on Lord Henry Graunham in the cottage. But it was a lie. Lord Henry Graunham wasn't in the cottage. I was there, because I'd arranged to meet him there. When he didn't turn up I thought he'd thrown me over."

"Some of the fellow's clothing was found in the cottage after you left it."

"I dessay. He intended to come. I keep telling you that. But that doesn't alter the fact that, as it turned out, he did *not* come."

"H'm! I shall of course immediately get in touch with Shrager and——"

"You can't. He's lying low. Don't you understand. I've only got to give the word and there'll be a warrant for perjury out against him."

Corbeyne extinguished his cigarette, stood very still for a moment, then lighted another.

"If Shrager was lying—if it was not Lord Henry Graunham—who was it? There must have been some man there."

Again he was answered with hard glibness that suggested rehearsal.

"You say there must have been some man there. Well, I say there was not. I swear there was not. What do you bring against my oath? Nothing. You can take it for granted that I *must* have been unfaithful if you like. But you can't prove it. I wasn't."

Corbeyne did not believe her. But so far she was unanswerable. At this stage it was definitely impossible to prove her infidelity. Yet the very manner of her denial left him convinced that she lied. True, the man could not have been Graunham as he had believed. To that extent he had maligned her. To that extent he had apparently given her a real grievance; something very different from the imagined slights and cruelties with which she used to insult him to her own vengeful satisfaction. . . .

Corbeyne studied his cigarette. He felt at the most colossal disadvantage imaginable.

"I am bound to accept your denial, Katherine," he said with a touch of conscious gallantry. "I suppose—in having accused you of an infidelity I cannot prove I've done you about as great an injury as a man can do a woman. If there were any means possible of balancing the wrong——"

She smiled with her lips. There was no longer light enough for him to see clearly the expression in her eyes. They gleamed queerly, almost slyly.

"There's a way of balancing it, all right," she said. There was now a perceptible coarseness in her voice. It evoked in Corbeyne an intense longing to have done with her, and be gone.

"Of course, you must let me——" he began with a nervous laugh.

"There's no need for *you* to do anything," she interrupted. "It's me that's going to do things, this time."

"Do things? Do what?"

"Re-open the case."

"No!"

"Yes, John. Unless——"

She had uncoiled herself from the chair with a studied languor that somehow brought her close to him. Too close at a moment like this, when only the weapon she had unsheathed held him in her presence. Heavens, couldn't she sense his dislike of her and all her ways? He drew back sharply, then disciplined himself. He must be just, for was her accusation not a direct reproach of justice? He forced himself to state her case for her.

"Judgment was given against you on a fact which, it appears, you can now prove was not a fact. You think, therefore, that on your application the judgment would be rescinded. Well, I doubt it. A decree is absolute. . . . There has never been a test case of this nature. I don't think for a moment it would come off."

"The gentleman I saw this afternoon—a lawyer, he was—he said he thought there was a very good chance *indeed* that it would come off," she said with slow emphasis. She was still smiling. "But we won't wrangle about that because I shall only re-open the case if you won't give me what I want."

"If it's anything I *can* give you——"

"Oh, it is. I want—*you*."

CHAPTER VI

A TANGLED TRIANGLE

PRESENTLY John Corbeyne became aware that she was speaking; her voice now was low, and there was an undercurrent in it that would not let him forget that he had had to jerk his arm away from under her hand.

"What d'you think I've been doing these last ten years, John? I've been going from boarding-house to boarding-house. Thanks to you I was a little better off than most of the other inmates. They used to be civil on that account, but they'd whisper behind my back and watch me like cats when there were any men about. They didn't know I'd been divorced. It was just that I wasn't bad-looking and couldn't show a husband. First I thought maybe I'd marry again, but the men"—her white face twisted—"those I met, anyway, they were all beasts. Twice I settled alone in a small way—once in a suburb, the second time in the provinces. It was worse there; the neighbours called—once. Well, I want a third chance. I want a home, and you in it, to show I'm as good as anybody."

Corbeyne took a long breath. He found it difficult to refrain from embarrassed laughter. Then he noticed that there was something odd in Katherine's manner. It was neither the old pretence of being driven and dominated, nor the new, mechanical hardness that sounded as though someone were behind her in her

attack. It was rather of the quality he had detected in her laugh—a nervous sincerity that would be deaf to reason.

"I am profoundly sorry for you, Katherine," he said. "I have injured you and I shall carry that knowledge about with me until my death. At the same time, the—remedy—you propose is—impossible. I propose that I double your allowance, buy you a car and some furs and so on, and that you then try a better set of people than the boarding-house level. You'd get friends soon enough, you'd marry——"

She cut in doggedly:

"I don't want your money. I don't want another husband. I want to go back *with you* to that suburb where they sneered at me and show them I'm as good as they are. And if you won't come I shall tell the lawyer to start proceedings against Shrager."

The full strength of her position had not yet come home to him.

"But, my dear girl, what would you gain by re-opening it? You'd see my career ruined through the publicity and Sylvia made thoroughly uncomfortable; but that's all. Because the legal tie that would fetter you and me again, if your ultimate action were successful, would be broken easily enough by your divorcing me; after which Sylvia and I would re-marry. So——"

"You're not very bright, are you, John? *I wouldn't divorce you.*"

"You wouldn't——"

To Corbeyne words became in that instant weapons that broke in his hands. He could only gape at this woman, gape and stare, while fear such as he had never known before twisted and turned at his heart.

"I thought you grasped that at once, John. I shouldn't divorce you. You and me would be married and *she*—well, I suppose she's got friends that would stick to her; of course, it's hard on the child, but then

it's been hard on me all these years, you can't deny that——"

"Stop! You wouldn't do this, Katherine—this vile thing——" He was stammering at her hoarsely, his terror in his eyes.

"Not if you'll give me what I want—which is, put me right with those old cats in that suburb. You'll be 'Mr. Brierly' to them, you see. When you're up in the City you can be what you like. I don't care about anything so long as you'll leave her and come to me."

John Corbeyne laughed then, brutally—the brutality could not be denied.

"Leave *her* for you? Leave Sylvia for you?"

"If you don't I'll make her known to the whole country as a woman that isn't married when she ought to have been." Her voice rose against his laughter and beat it down. "She'll be the mother of a——"

He flung himself forward and then knew that he had, at last, come within an ace of striking her. While he battled for self-control, he saw her deliberately, maliciously assume her pose of cowed and desolate womanhood.

"Oh!" she moaned. "Don't—don't hit me! I never meant to anger you. Oh, you frighten me so, you——" She retreated against a screen, her arm dramatically raised to ward off the blow that never would have fallen. She rolled her eyes, she trembled extravagantly, she enjoyed herself. Corbeyne's soul sickened at that distorted joy. . . .

God, to be tied to her again, with memories of Sylvia like sea and wind and sky calling eternally at his spirit's gate! To know that Sylvia, lonely in her bewildered pride, would hate his name. . . .

But the alternative? Sylvia broken in full view of the pointing world, the child handicapped before the race began, himself pitied but, socially, shunned. . . .

Which was it to be? Corbeyne strode across the room and, flinging the window wide, leant out. The

soft air beat against his eyelids; the roar of London came up to him like a dirge.

He looked down. The street below was dark with traffic.

This humming, throbbing world at his feet was to be wrenched from him; as well as losing Sylvia and the Jobber and the spacious ease he had come to value so much, he was to lose also his work. "*When you're up in the City you can be what you like.*" Pah! What could he "like" to be but John Corbeyne, the man who was to have been England's first Minister of Credit?

Behind him Katherine's extravagant sobs were overcharging an already tense atmosphere. They told Corbeyne that when she got him back, when she had buried him with her in the suburb where she was to be as good as anybody, she would revert to the old torments; evidently she knew that she could not improve upon them. She intended to be an unhappy, cruelly ill-treated wife; struggle as he might, he would be thrust into the rôle of tyrannical and even brutal husband.

Every fighting instinct in him rose now. He turned back into the room and faced the woman, who trembled away from him in her chair.

"Drop that, please," he snapped. "You needn't pretend to me that I have ever terrorised you, or ever would——"

"Oh, but you do! You don't mean to, I'm sure, but you do," moaned Katherine, seizing her opportunity. "It's silly of me to be so weak, but my heart's not all it might be, and any shock——"

"Katherine, listen to me. I have been immensely successful in business since we parted. I pay income tax on fifty thousand a year. If I join you in the life you desire, I shall be penniless. 'Mr. Brierly's' value in the money market is nil. Now if you will renounce the compensation you demand of me personally and give me an undertaking that you will not reopen the

case, or make the facts public in any other way, I will settle half my fortune on you—twenty-five thousand pounds a year.”

Her handkerchief was still before her face, but over the edge of it her queer grey eyes gleamed at him. As he had expected, they showed no trace of tears. Her voice, however, was carefully feeble.

“I can’t make you understand; you never did understand me. I don’t want twenty-five thousand a year as much as I want to go back and show those that looked down on me that I could look down on *them*, if I wanted to. If I was rolling in money, they wouldn’t care, they’d say it was luck, that anyone can be lucky.”

Corbeyne considered it. Her incoherence, exasperating as it must always be after Sylvia’s gift of clear, keen word-play, had in this case at least not obscured her philosophy. She wanted concrete benefits, and would not exchange them for the vaguer glories of wealth. She wanted to have two servants, where her neighbours had one; late dinner while they dined at midday; a fire in both dining-room and drawing-room while they economised with a portable oil-stove.

He saw himself in this menage that was to vindicate her, and his whole soul cried out against it.

“My God, Katherine, haven’t you thought of me at all? Not my work—you couldn’t grasp that—but my private life. My feeling for my child, my hopes for him. My home—how can I put it to you? This second marriage of mine was not a marriage of impetuous sentiment as yours and mine was, nor was it a marriage of convenience. Sylvia and I love each other—very greatly. It may sound absurd to you, but we are ideally happy. And to leave that happiness with a false explanation, to know that Sylvia was alone with the boy, all her faith in me gone, everything she’d thought solid and enduring lying round her in fragments——”

But Katherine had fortified herself with tears again.

"Oh!" she wept. "I can't help all that. It's unfair to blame all that on to me. Look what *I've* suffered! Look how miserable I've been. Please say what you're going to decide, and then we needn't talk about it any more."

Corbeyne stood very still. She had stated her terms. There was nothing more to be said.

"You are asking me to choose the manner in which I shall destroy myself," he said. "Well, one cannot come to a decision like that in a couple of minutes. You must give me time. Give me your address. If I have not joined you there by the end of the week, reopen the case."

"There's a card in my bag," she returned in a whisper. "Oh dear, I feel so upset, I'm really too weak to move——"

Corbeyne opened the bag. Under a litter of powder puffs, loose coins and heavily scented handkerchiefs he found the card.

"I will decide before the end of the week," he repeated, and went to the door.

As he passed out he looked at her. She was still huddled in her chair, still acting weakness. Weakness! In that instant she appeared to him as strong as death.

CHAPTER VII

COUNSEL'S OPINION

HE lingered in the Park on the way back. The problem was devastatingly simple. His divorce had been obtained on a misapprehension of fact. That misapprehension would be legally established by the criminal prosecution of Shrager for perjury. Then would arise a pretty riddle for the lawyers to wrangle and make reputations over.

How did the thing shape legally? He must take expert advice on that. Not that the legal part of it, even if it were favourable to himself, mattered so vastly! The mass of the electorate still looked askance at divorce.

A laugh of genuine, bitter amusement broke from him. He perceived a monstrous absurdity—a Cabinet Minister clinging to his portfolio, while learned lawyers argued the point of the legality of his marriage.

Of course he could not enter the Cabinet while scandal threatened—scandal of such a proportion that it would make practically no difference whether some legal technicality were to declare Sylvia his wife or his mistress. He would have to think. . . . He had to key himself up to the task of keeping the disaster from Sylvia.

He was a poor actor, he knew; but somehow he must sustain the illusion that nothing had happened. For to one resolution he clung with all his strength; he would

resist the temptation to talk the whole thing over with her. When—if—he left her, to become ‘Mr. Brierly’ in an obscure suburb, she must not know where he had gone. She must not be able to trace him, for her own sake; he gloried in her strength, but he feared it. To see her spending it in vain, breaking herself against Katherine and her tears, would have taken the last shred of endurance from him.

He looked at his watch. He would just have time to dress for dinner. So much the better! In bustle there would be no time for talk. And later on he could contrive to imply the existence of an urgent business problem. Lying to her already! As Mr. Brierly, in his snug little suburb, might lie to Mrs. Brierly. . . .

His sick despair drove him out of the by-paths of the Park. Back, he must get to his home. So soon he would be shut out from it, from Sylvia, his work, everything. Reaction came cutting into the thought. Wasn’t he going to put up any fight at all, then? Curse it! Was he surrendering without a blow because disaster threatened either choice?

He gained his dressing-room without seeing Sylvia. While he hurriedly dressed he remembered that they had a small dinner-party. There would be Larkin, the election agent, with his wife, Sylvia’s brother, Tom, and Rawson, the managing director of Gorlay’s bank, each with their wives. That was good. There would be plenty of chatter. Chatter was what he wanted—something that would compel his attention and prevent him from thinking.

He went downstairs. He was late, but Sylvia had evidently made his apologies, for no one seemed in the least annoyed. They went in to dinner. Corbeyne found that Sylvia had allotted Mrs. Rawson to him; he felt thankful. She was a very estimable but rather ponderous woman. That suited his mood. He suspected that he was rather ponderous himself—he knew he was always very bad at small-talk—so that he was

more content to listen to Mrs. Rawson's opinion as to "what things were coming to." He could manage that kind of thing with the utmost ease. He kept her employed while his attention was furtively focussed on Sylvia.

She was wearing a lovely gown; like starlight. Its shimmer was somehow reflected in her eyes, making them a deeper blue, so that Corbeyne thought of a summer night, powdered with stars, remote yet passionate. . . . With an admiration wholly detached from his feeling for her he thought how well she filled the rôle of hostess.

Perhaps she was being a hostess now for the last time in her life! What sort of an existence would she have if he left her? An existence as broken as his own, no doubt.

"If you take my advice, you'll have nothing to do with the Russians when you get your portfolio, Mr. Corbeyne. After all, charity begins at home, and if there is money available for loans—well, really——"

He did not feel the least bit annoyed with Mrs. Rawson. He hoped she would keep on. Rawson never got annoyed with her, either. He knew she was a fool and so did everybody else. Fancy Sylvia talking like that! Poor old Rawson! But then probably Rawson was fond of her, and he, at any rate, had the power to keep her.

"You will have unexampled opportunities, unexampled," Mrs. Rawson was saying. "You'll have the Government in the hollow of your hand. Jack said so. Jack says the Government have got in such a tangle they must have a Minister of Credit, and that you are the only man whom the City would support. If they hadn't fixed on you, Jack says, they would have had to go out of Office."

Corbeyne smiled.

"I'm afraid your husband allows his sense of friendship to destroy his judgment," he said.

"No. It's true. Everyone know's it's true."

Open flattery, but Corbeyne didn't even bother to be annoyed.

It did not for a moment occur to him that the babbler might be babbling the truth—that he was really indispensable to the country. John Corbeyne's was not the type of mentality that weighs its worth. If he had been assured of his unique importance he would have been amazed and more than a little alarmed; as it was, no one realised the depths of his misapprehension on the subject except his wife. And she loved that profound humility in him too much to breathe a word.

Sylvia arose and a minute later Corbeyne was alone with the men. He kept them as long as decency would allow, then took them to the drawing-room. The pleasant evening came to its end with music and laughter.

As they were seeing Tom and his wife off an idea occurred to Corbeyne. It came when Sylvia, turning a little wistfully to him, told him he looked tired, had looked tired all the evening.

"I'm rather harassed," he answered. "I won't bore you with details. But I've been doing a bit of thinking between the intervals of gossip and I'm afraid I shall have to ring up young Bayliss to-night."

"To-night! He may be in bed."

"In that case I'm afraid he'll have to get out of it," said Corbeyne with a laugh that was a credit to him.

"You run off to bed, my sweet. I may be a couple of hours yet."

Sylvia looked at him. He met her gaze with just the right expression of passive resignation to duty, but if the gaze had held a second longer he would have wilted.

"Very well," she said. "Good-night."

She went upstairs. For a moment he lingered in the hall. She had not kissed him. Had that uncanny instinct of hers which ever seemed to divine his moods

warned her that it were better not to kiss him? He watched the beauty of her hand as it trailed up the bannisters, and found his gaze dim, suddenly, with pain.

He strode into the study, went to the telephone and gave Bayliss's number. He had made Bayliss professionally and Bayliss knew it; he would not object to turning out.

"That you, Bayliss? Corbeyne speaking. I want you on an urgent matter. Will you come? . . . Thanks very much, I'm very grateful."

Five years ago Bayliss had been a struggling young solicitor to whom the rent of a single office had been an ever present problem. Corbeyne had recognised his ability, with the result that Bayliss now answered the call in his own Daimler.

He entered the study with the pleasant ease of manner that Corbeyne had always liked in him. He accepted a whisky, and Corbeyne began.

"There'll have to be a certain amount of camouflage in this deal, Bayliss," he told him. "And we haven't a moment to lose. A man who is to be associated with me at the Ministry—assuming I get there—has just told me the most remarkable tale about himself, and I don't quite know how we stand."

The lie was necessary, Corbeyne told himself. There were too many interests involved beside his own to indulge in the luxury of candour.

"A personal matter, eh?" opined Bayliss. "Some matrimonial tangle?"

"Exactly. I'm afraid—I shall have to keep the man's name out. I promised. But I'll give you the facts. This man, we'll call him Smith—divorced his wife some years ago with, say Jones, as co-respondent. Smith marries again, has a child, does well, and—comes into politics. By what was little more than a trivial accident it is suddenly discovered that Jones, the co-respondent, who has not been heard of since the case

was started, was actually out of the country at the time. You understand? It means that the decree was granted under misapprehension of facts—it's as if a man were convicted of murder and later on an effective alibi were proved."

"Very queer!" said Bayliss. "What's the problem? They can't rake the whole thing up again, you know. A decree absolute is absolute. No Court has authority to revise it."

"Quite so!" agreed Corbeyne. "But there are complications. As a civil case it cannot be revised. But suppose it were made the basis of a criminal prosecution?"

"How the——"

"In this way. The decree was obtained on the perjured evidence of—Brown. Mrs. Smith No. 1—the *divorcée*—being anxious to make trouble, threatens to charge Brown with perjury when a conviction would seem reasonably certain. The question is, would the conviction of Brown *automatically* annul Smith's marriage with the second Mrs. Smith? That's the whole thing. I want you to draw the facts up and take counsel's opinion on whether any civil action would lie after the conviction of Brown, the probable verdict, and so forth, with special reference as to whether it would make Smith's child illegitimate. Do you think you can get me that opinion by mid-day to-morrow?"

Bayliss considered the question.

"H'm! I had better take counsel's opinion of the whole thing," he answered. "I'll stir things up and you shall have it by, say, four o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

"Good man!" said Corbeyne. "I'm lunching with the Kingsway to-morrow. You'll ring me up at four o'clock and report the opinion. You understand that it wouldn't do for this chap to take even a minor position in the Government if there's going to be a scandal immediately afterwards. Have another before you go."

"No, thanks. I'd better get back and draft the thing myself." He smiled his pleasant smile, and left.

With vigour Corbeyne bullied himself into a promise to think no more about the matter until he had heard counsel's opinion. Over breakfast on the following morning he was sufficiently buoyant to be able at least to sustain to himself the illusion that Sylvia noticed nothing amiss.

It was half-past three by the time he got away from the Kingsway lunch. It was a quarter to four by the time he reached his study and, finding his nerves unequal to the strain of waiting, rang up Bayliss at his office.

"Have you got that opinion?" he asked, forcing a note of indifference into his voice.

"Yes, I've got it," announced Bayliss, "though counsel admits that there's practically nothing on which to base an opinion, except the Principles of the Constitution, and a layman can do that. It seems that a decree absolute must stand exactly as a verdict of guilty must stand after it has been upheld by the Court of Criminal Appeal. There's no Court with the power to revise the decision of the Court of Appeal. And of course they got over that in actual practice by means of the Royal Prerogative. The case you've given me is really the same in its essentials."

"Then can—Mrs. Smith—invoke the Royal Prerogative?" demanded Corbeyne.

"It's contrary to Constitutional practice to invoke the Royal Prerogative in civil cases," replied Bayliss. "That's as far as counsel will go. No lawyer can state positively that it cannot be invoked in an unprecedented case such as this one."

Corbeyne stared before him and said nothing.

"I'll tell you one thing," went on Bayliss. "If the—er—principal in the case takes action after the conviction for perjury there'll be a very great deal of public interest in the case, whatever the ultimate issue."

"H'm. I'll talk it over with him and see what's to be done. Many thanks, Bayliss. Good-bye!"

A very great deal of public interest—Lord, how horrible!

He saw nothing of the Jobber at all that day, and very little of Sylvia. She seemed quiet, the vivid spirit of her a little dimmed. Carfax came to a hurried dinner, and kept him busy with a long manifesto till eleven, after which he had to get back to the Russian figures for the Prime Minister on the following day. It was terribly rough luck on Carfax, he reflected. Carfax, was putting body and soul into the propaganda, and it was now about a hundred to one that the whole thing, as far as the figurehead was concerned, would end in fiasco and scandal. It was only an instinct stronger than himself that drove Corbeyne to continuing the work.

He saw the Prime Minister on the following afternoon and, illogically enough, was disappointed that the Russian figures were not touched on. There was a brief, pleasant chat on general lines, and then:

"I am very glad indeed that you decided to accept our offer, Mr. Corbeyne," said the Prime Minister. "We have had a certain amount of friction with the City throughout the last decade. I, personally, was surprised at the enthusiasm with which they received your nomination. It will be a great privilege to number you among my colleagues."

The words echoed in his brain as he made his way home. Strong wine that nearly went to his head! To many a man the personal tribute would have meant everything. To John Corbeyne it was merely the seal upon the work he was to do; it confirmed his hope that his usefulness would be social, acceptable to his countrymen.

He drew a long breath of pain. Before his eyes, blocking his way, he saw again the figure of Katherine, made fantastically powerful by a legal technicality.

Hang the law anyway! There would never be any need of the law. The moment the prosecution of Shrager began, the country would cry out that the whole divorce had been faked by himself. Petitions would be signed by millions of the opponents of divorce begging the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary or someone to invoke the Royal Prerogative. The case would live in the memory of man for generations. What on earth would it matter whether the Minister were to accede to the petition or not?

CHAPTER VIII

CRISIS

THE busy hours brought him, before he realised it, to that half-hour before the dressing bell, which he and Sylvia always tried to spend together. She would come into his dressing-room, a pleasant, untidy place, where everything smelt of smoke, and sit opposite him in a big chair and talk. She came now, light-footed, clear-eyed, with a swing of soft yellow gauzes.

"A tea-frock," she explained, standing before him. "Like it?"

Corbeyne managed to admire the tea-frock for quite five minutes. Sylvia regarded him with an intensely blue gaze as she dropped into the big chair.

There was a little silence.

"Still haunted by the Peer-Criminal?" she asked suddenly. She always used that light tone when she wanted to talk of some fundamental. Each of them was a little over-afraid of sentimentality.

"Y—es," he admitted. Her penetration had startled him.

"I wonder why men are so much more shocked by the idea of divorce than women," she remarked. "Five years ago you scarcely dared propose to me because you were so ashamed of it. Supposing when you told me about—Katherine—you had had to admit that there had been no legal tie, you would have been

ashamed, certainly, but you'd have been just a little surprised if I'd refused you on that account. I think men attach a terrible amount of importance to legal forms."

"Legal forms!" he repeated. "They're pretty vital, you know." How extraordinarily near the mark she had got!

"Yes, they're vital," she agreed, "but only in the sense that law and order is vital. It would be awful if they weren't there, but they don't really touch you unless you get in their way."

"Marriage, though, is a thing apart."

"It isn't, really," she pointed out. "To a woman of ordinarily decent instincts it's the idea behind the marriage that counts. If you and Katherine had been together, unmarried, before you and I met, I should have felt just the same that I was your second wife. In the same way if, when you kissed me in the garden at home you had been legally married to her, do you think I should have sent you away?"

"Sylvia!" He became excited. Would it be possible then to defy Katherine, to let her do her worst, let the world point, and the City leer?

"Of course, it's only theoretical, and I'm speaking entirely from my own point of view." She met his eyes. "But—if you and I had cared to face social ostracism by living in a free marriage, it would have been our own affair—to a point. To the point where the theory breaks down. The Jobber! Then I should have become an immoral woman and you an immoral man."

"Ah!" Corbeyne relaxed. The vision of defiance disappeared. The Jobber!

"It's the idea of making a child pay that smashes up one's right to contract a free marriage. If one is a woman, at any rate."

"Don't you think the child's point of view would weigh with the man, then?" Corbeyne pretended

to be having trouble with a pipe that would not draw.

"With men like you, oh yes," returned Sylvia quickly. "But there aren't many like you, John." She slipped out of the big chair, and, on her knees beside him, laid her cheek against his arm.

Corbeyne bit savagely at the stem of his pipe. This—this was—he couldn't stick this. And yet how powerful a coincidence that to-day of all days Sylvia should touch upon such a subject. He had longed to talk it all over with her, and now it was as if the discussion had taken place, and she were giving her verdict.

"It's only when we're talking about things like this that I realise how I love the Jobber. If any action of ours were to cast a stigma upon him——"

"Supposing the action were mine, Sylvia. Would you hate me?"

She stirred, and her lips touched his hand.

"It's unthinkable, John. But yes—just because I love you as I do, with the whole of myself and my brain and my imagination, I think I should hate you if——. But why are we talking such nonsense, I wonder? Tell me about your interview with the Prime Minister."

He bent his head, and, so lightly that she never knew, kissed her hair. She had spoken. She had made it clear what he must do.

CHAPTER IX

THE ELOPEMENT

TWO hours later John Corbeyne was alone in his study.

Sylvia had departed to join friends at the Opera. She had been a little reluctant to go. Her wonderful eyes had rested frequently on her husband's face during dinner, and she had leant forward in the car to fling up a hand in affectionate salute. Sitting grimly at his desk, Corbeyne remembered that last little gesture and wished passionately that he had risked taking her into his arms, before she went, and giving her the long, desperate kisses of farewell. . . .

He pulled himself together. There was a good deal to be arranged. First, he must write out a power of attorney in Sylvia's favour. He completed the document and rang the bell.

"Oh, Woodhams, I've just received a telephone message which will necessitate my going to the North to-night. I may not be back until the day after to-morrow. Ask Garfield to pack my Gladstone, please. I shan't want him to come with me."

"Yes, sir."

Corbeyne waited until the man was about to leave the room and then, as if absent-mindedly, continued:

"I've a document here I want you to witness, if you will, Woodhams. It will require two of you. Fetch Garfield."

A minute later Woodhams appeared with the valet.

"As I am not quite certain when I shall be back," he said, addressing the two men, "I have signed a document which is called a power of attorney. It gives Mrs. Corbeyne power to act on my behalf. You can read it if you wish. There is nothing private in it. I want you both to sign as witnesses to my signature."

That was quite simple. When the two servants had left Corbeyne wrote to Lord Carfax. That was quite easy, too, because he put out of his head the memory that Carfax was his friend. Next came the letter to Sylvia. That was difficult.

Soon he was writing. He had written four sheets before he pulled himself up and glanced at the last lines. He frowned. Then he re-read all that he had written.

"No, no, no!" he muttered. "She can tell from this that I love her, that I'm driven from her by force of circumstances. She mustn't know that or she'll start inquiring into the circumstances."

He tore up the four sheets, then held a match to them until they were burned to ashes.

Then he steeled himself to another attempt.

"I must write the note of the conventional husband who is suddenly infatuated with a conventional vamp. I *must*."

He found his pen unequal to the task of inventing. He was driven to plagiarism. He had heard a letter like that read out in the course of a play some few weeks ago. He wrote what he could remember and then proceeded to adapt it. When he had written it he thought it looked vulgar. But that, he reflected, was so much the better.

"I would hate you if any deliberate action of yours were to cast a stigma on our child."

There were other things she would hate him for, though they had been beyond her imagination at the time. She would hate him for revealing himself as a sensualist who could throw up a useful career and defile a love for the sake of an infatuation.

He finished the part about the elopement. It was distinctly melodramatic. Then he had to tell her about the power of attorney and his task would be done. . . . He put it in an envelope which he addressed and sealed—then left it on the pad beside the one addressed to Lord Carfax.

Garfield had probably finished the packing by now, he thought. He left the study. In the hall he encountered the Jobber's nurse.

It was no good taking a last look at the Jobber—it was merely turning the knife!

"Is Master Michael all right, nurse?"

"Yes, sir, he's been very bright all day."

"Good-night, nurse."

"Good-night, sir."

So much for the Jobber! Where was Woodhams with the Gladstone?

"Bissett has come back from Covent Garden with the car, sir."

"I don't want him. I'll have a taxi. I'm just going to change."

He went up into his dressing-room and changed into a lounge suit.

When he came out of the dressing-room he had to pass the door of Sylvia's room. The door was open. He snatched at the handle and shut it—slammed it.

Woodhams was still waiting in the hall with the bag. Funny sort of job for a man—but Woodhams and his kind were very convenient.

"Mrs. Corbeyne doesn't know I've had to go," he explained. "If she comes in tell her I've left a note on my study table, will you, Woodhams?"

"Very good, sir. The taxi is outside, sir."

Woodhams ushered him into the taxi.

"Euston, sir?" he asked.

"Er—oh, yes, Euston. Good-night, Woodhams."

"Good-night, sir."

The taxi started.

CHAPTER X

THE HOUSE CRUMBLES

SYLVIA CORBEYNE, at the conclusion of an opera, which had proved unexpectedly tedious to her, accompanied her host and hostess and their other guest to a restaurant for supper.

The other guest was Lord Carfax. Sylvia was glad of his presence; his cheerful habits covered her frequent silences, and his open admiration of her husband soothed and pleased her. The admiration, she found, was not confined to Lord Carfax. A number of people joined the supper-party, and every one of them had flattering things to say to her about the future Minister of Credit.

She felt a thrill of pride in the fact that he was already recognised as a man to whom a part of the nation's destiny had been entrusted. It was hardly a social pride, though there were social sweets in his success, for which she was much too honest to pretend disdain. It was rather a pride in him and in herself, for she had played her part in his rapid advancement during the last few years.

It had been a terribly hard part sometimes. As wife, she had made cruel demands on herself as lover. The long evenings when he had wanted to work in solitude, the evenings when a hint of entreaty from her would have made him abandon the work! Sometimes it had been so hard to refrain from giving the hint that she had feared their life would lose its savour. It had

not lost its savour. Latterly they had attained that deeper intimacy of thought which can transcend mere physical separation. She had taught herself to feel a sense of nearness to him even when he was shut up in his study, and she was elsewhere. She could tell when he was unhappy. . . .

She shivered suddenly and faltered in her conversation with her host. She felt very strongly that John was unhappy *now*. She tried to analyse the emotion. It was more than anxiety for his health ; more than the conviction, not new to her, that, during the last two days, he had been worrying about his first wife. It was a strong urge to go to him, to help.

A fragment of her one-time guardian's chatter came across the table to her.

"No, no coffee, thank you. I only drink coffee at your house, my dear lady, and really I don't know why."

Sylvia smiled. Dear old Jim! He wore his little gallantries threadbare. Presently she caught his eye and made with her fan the little sign that years ago he had invented for her. It meant that she wanted him to take her home.

Ten minutes later he was placing her ermine cloak over her shoulders, and escorting her to his car.

"I'm sorry to drag you away," she said, "but I—I'm tired. And also I heard you flirting with Lady Kingclere, and at your age—you must be quite seventy, Jim!—it's too scandalous to be allowed to pass. Well, fifty-two, then ; only a few years younger than seventy."

As they drove back together to the house near St. James's Park, Carfax rhapsodised. He had the genius of being able to believe wholeheartedly in the goodness of anything that he "took up." There was so much genuine justification in the case of John Corbeyne that he was more than ordinarily convincing.

A sudden application of the brakes stopped him. When the car resumed its pace he did not immediately continue.

"Go on, Jim," begged Sylvia. "It's lovely."

"Vain woman! Peacock!" ejaculated Carfax.

"Mixed metaphor, Jim! But do go on."

"Do you think that in talking about John I'm trying to pay you compliments by proxy?" he demanded with good-humoured scorn.

"No, you're not trying to pay me compliments," she answered as if she were taking him seriously. "But you're drenching me in flattery when you're talking about him like that, and I thoroughly enjoy it."

"H'm! Talking about him makes you preen your feathers, eh?" laughed Carfax. "Because you made him, I suppose? I know. The best of wives think that."

"I don't think it," she replied. "I may have helped him a little in the small things, but he made himself in the big ones. Don't you see, Jim, you old stupid—he's all the splendid things you say about him—and he likes being my husband?"

"Do you know, Sylvia," said Carfax profoundly, "that you and John are a couple of sentimental children. You want to be careful with that sort of thing or people think you are putting it on for effect. Of course I don't mind—hullo, here we are."

Woodhams opened the door, closed it, and stood before Sylvia.

"Mr. Corbeyne has been called out of Town, Madam," he said.

Lord Carfax heard. He never stood on ceremony when he was startled.

"Gone out of Town!" inquired Carfax. "What for? Did he say where he was going, Woodhams?"

"No, my lord, Mr. Corbeyne did not tell me. But he said, Madam, that he had left a note for you on his study table."

Sylvia was on her way to the study. Carfax followed hard on her heels.

John had gone out of Town. Carfax knew nothing about it, as he was loudly remarking, so that it could

not be to do with anything political. Sylvia battled with the feeling that there was something mysterious about this sudden departure.

It was impossible that the sense of sympathy with which she surrounded him should fail to receive a shock as she entered the room. The shock was quite definite. She had an eerie feeling that John was peering at her from behind the curtains.

She reached the desk and saw the letter addressed to herself.

"There's one for you too, Jim," she said, and passed it to him.

One for Carfax!

She tore the envelope, and read the first few lines of the letter. Then she sat down and read the first few lines again.

"With great humiliation I must confess to you that I am drawn from your side by a passion which I have tried to resist, but cannot. I am wholly to blame. I know that I am acting wrongly, possibly even cruelly. I can remember you only with gratitude. You have never failed me. I think that perhaps the very perfection of our marriage brought our love to a climax. It would be better for us both that we should avoid the aftermath. You will find that I have made all the necessary arrangements regarding property. In another envelope, addressed to yourself, you will find a power of attorney——"

The catastrophe was too sudden to touch her emotions. She seemed to feel a sense of outrage in the thinking part of her only. Her intellect was staggered by a monstrous absurdity. "*Drawn from your side.*" It was the language of the Lyceum.

The quick reaction of the subconscious which is called presence of mind, came to her immediate rescue. She folded the letter and placed it in her dress. It was an excellent piece of stage-business registering unconcern. But the audience was not attending.

The audience was obviously about to make a scene on his own account.

"What's the matter, Jim?" asked Sylvia. Her voice was balanced and cool. Afterwards he remembered that coolness, that daring, pathetic bluff.

"John has gone mad!" Carfax waved his arm at her foolishly. "Do you hear, Sylvia? He has gone mad. What did he say to you in that letter?"

"Apparently—the same that he has said to you."

Carfax glared.

"Don't let's start fencing with each other," he said. "Will you read my letter?"

He thrust it into her hand. She glanced at it almost listlessly.

"Dear Jim, I hereby resign my right to look an honest man in the face. I am doing the dirty on you. I am not going to be the Minister of Credit. I am not even going to be myself any longer. I am clearing out. The usual reason, of course! My affairs are wholly in order, and I have left Sylvia full powers. I leave it to you to put up any story you like for the Cabinet, and for the public. Whatever lie you tell I will stand by. If you decide to say that I am dead, give me until ten o'clock to-morrow before making the announcement. Yours, John Corbeyne."

Sylvia returned him the letter. There was no further object in bluffing.

"I am sorry I can't show you my letter," she said. "But it's really unnecessary. He just says that he's leaving me. There's something about business affairs too. That's all."

Lord Carfax tried to speak, choked, tried again, and could only manage:

"Had you any idea, Sylvia?"

"None whatever. When I said—*that*—to you just now in your car, I—wasn't fooling you. I—thought it was true."

She had tilted her head back until it rested against the

the back of the old oaken chair. Against the carved wood her hair glittered, and her eyes blazed their blue. In the space of a few minutes the soft appeal of her had been wiped out, as a delicate shading may be wiped from a sketch. There were left only the hard, clear lines of a magnificent pride. . . .

"My God, Sylvia! I'm terribly sorry for you. I—I'm afraid I'm no good at this sort of thing. I'd better clear out. But I can't leave you alone. Let me send my sister to stay the night with you. She's a jolly good sort."

"It's all right, Jim, you needn't be alarmed." Her laugh made him blink and turn away. "I'm not going to be hysterical or anything. It's too—big—to make a fuss about. What are you going to do? You're pretty badly in the lurch, aren't you?"

With the self-absorption of his sex, Carfax wheeled back and gave himself up to his own grievance.

"Lurch!" he raved. "Suppose Beatty had committed suicide in the middle of Jutland! Suppose any kind of desertion of a general in the midst of a battle! I'm not exaggerating, Sylvia. I tell you solemnly that there'll be a tremendous depreciation of values on the Continent to-morrow morning. There'll be a money panic because the public will think the Government have backed out of their promises. I'm not saying that his was the only brain that could cope with the situation, brilliant though he was. There are a thousand financiers in England who see the way through, but not one whom the rest of the crowd will allow to take it. The whole thing goes on confidence. Partly by his genius and partly by his good record and one thing and another, Corbeyne was trusted in finance more than any living man. If he were a doddering imbecile the thing could still be carried through in his name."

Lord Carfax was striding about the room like a caged beast. Sylvia, her life in ashes at her feet, sat in her great chair, and tried to care that others had been hurt by John Corbeyne, too.

"Do you understand? He's mad!" cried Carfax. "It's the only tenable proposition. He's mad! The man I've known and trusted and liked for over ten years to let his country down for the sake of some beastly intrigue! . . . It'd make you laugh, Sylvia. . . . I must find some way out. Something must be done. We can't let things slide. You don't know how far this credit business reaches. It means a revolution or so on the Continent. Trouble with France. More trouble with America."

"He didn't know it was like that," put in Sylvia. Her tone said that he meant so little now that one could afford to do him what justice one could.

"He never knew that he was really of national importance. That, at least, I can be quite sure about. His attitude was that it was very kind of the Cabinet to give him the chance to do work he liked."

"He was like a child in some things," raved Carfax. "He underestimated himself and his friends and his enemies. Look at Deagle. He never even knew that Deagle tried to break him over Amalgamated Copper. . . ."

"Whatever he thought—look at the fix we're in. I must think of something. I must find a way out. This is the end of me, too. I've foisted a dud on the public, and you never get a chance to do that twice . . . I can't just throw up the sponge. I must think of something. I must think of something."

Sylvia, in her cold, sick suffering, could realise that he was growing a little wild, but she had not the power to calm him. It was such an effort even to speak.

At last he stopped pacing the room, and stood in front of her.

"Sylvia, I've lost my nerve for the moment. I can't see here and now what is to be done. I must have a little time, even if it's only a very little. Will you—say absolutely nothing about what has happened for

a bit. That'll give me time to turn round. We'll start by swearing he has had a sudden operation."

"Yes, certainly," she replied tonelessly. "I should not have said anything in any case."

"By Jove, if Deagle gets hold of this——"

"Who is Deagle?"

"A City shark, who had good cause to hate him," snapped Carfax absently, and then:

"Of course, there are your rights," he said, diffidently. "You may want to dissolve your marriage. But—you will hold up for a bit?"

She nodded, and gave him her hand. He gripped it with a rough fervour that was a symbol of their mutual sympathy, and then left her.

"What do men do when this sort of thing happens?" Sylvia asked herself when she was left alone. "They have a drink."

She dragged herself up, poured out some whisky, smelt it, shuddered, and put it down untasted.

Then she tried one of his cigarettes. She was not used to smoking, and that, too, proved a failure.

On a peg in a recess was an old tweed coat of his which he used to don when he had a long stretch of work before him. She touched it—tentatively—as if it were alive. It smelt of the heavy tobacco he smoked in his pipe. She liked that heavy, clean smell. Dispassionately, even critically, she remembered that her lips had often touched that coat when she had come to persuade him that he had worked too long.

Perhaps that was the solution of the riddle. Perhaps she had given him too much of herself, so that her person, her companionship, her love, ever sweet to him, had cloyed by its sweetness, and he had fled from it.

Mercilessly she went over the whole of their life together, haling forth each unsolicited caress, relentlessly seeking the cause of her failure.

She was still in the study when the dawn showed faintly through the drawn curtains.

CHAPTER XI

THE MAISONNETTE

CORBEYNE changed taxis, then drove to an obscure hotel in Bloomsbury that he had known in earlier days.

There he at once wrote to Katherine, and told her she could expect him on the following day.

Then he was taken up to a small, shabby room. Clean, fortunately, but strangely bare after — No, that wasn't the way to tackle things. No memories. Nothing but the present.

He opened his Gladstone and tumbled his belongings out on the bed. Amongst them was a small flask of whisky. Good old Garfield! And there was water and a glass on the washstand.

He poured himself out a drink. A stiffer drink than he had ever had in all his life. As he placed the flask back on the washstand he raised his head and there met his eyes, straying out between the undrawn curtains, the star-studded heaven of the cloudless night.

Starlight. . . . Sylvia. . . . so terribly far away.

"She'll be back from the Opera by now. She'll have read my letter. She—I wonder whether she'll have the sense to take half a tumbler of whisky to help her through the first night? . . . No. No, I don't expect she will. . . ."

He removed the stopper from the flask again, and poured the whisky back untasted.

Then, turning out the light, he let the starlight have its way with him.

It was late afternoon when Corbeyne used the latch-key Katherine had sent him and let himself into the maisonnette at Ealing. It had taken him some time to discover the obscure road in which it was situated; the years during which he had arrived at places merely by stepping into the car and relying on Bissett had stolen a lot of his physical awareness. It had been a tedious search. He felt as though he had walked for miles.

In the morning he had been to Bayliss, and made over his entire property to Sylvia by Deed of Gift. It was a simple affair, with no conditions and no restrictions. Then he had had his moustache shaved off. And now——

The maisonnette was self-contained, he was glad to note. He had been studying "upper parts" on his way from the station, and he had doubted their privacy. This one was upstairs, also, but it was quite shut off. Corbeyne went quietly up the stairs that faced him and found himself on a landing graced by a fumed oak hat-rack and an umbrella-stand of the type which he remembered from church bazaar days—a chimney-like contrivance, stained green and decorated lavishly with painted lilies. In this stand reposed a number of sunshades. The sound of voices—two voices besides Katherine's—gave Corbeyne to understand that already "people" had called.

He moved quietly past the door of what was evidently the sitting-room, past another which, standing ajar, revealed a kitchen, and went upstairs. Here again there were two rooms. Katherine had claimed the larger of the two; her open trunks littered the floor. Corbeyne went into the other and shut the door.

It was all fumed oak, of a cheap but durable variety. There was no armchair, and after a moment's contemplation Corbeyne removed "Love Locked Out," the

solitary picture, and hid it in the wardrobe. There was an irritating design on the curtains, but otherwise the place was negative as a room in a hotel. That was all to the good. To live in a house stamped with Katherine's personality after the gracious, lofty place Sylvia had delighted to call "home," would have been a final, enduring torment.

He unpacked his Gladstone to the undercurrent of voices in the room below. To his annoyance he discovered that if he were near the fireplace he could hear fragments of the conversation of Katherine and her friends quite easily. He crossed over to the window and stared over meagre gardens to the backs of houses exactly like the one he was in. In a second-floor room a small boy of the Jobber's age played spasmodically with some wooden blocks. The Jobber was to have had a scooter for Christmas. He would be disappointed if they forgot and gave him something else. . . . For a kid of three he had a jolly good memory. . . .

The voices below went on and on. Corbeyne reminded himself that Katherine might reasonably demand his presence; he was to "put her right before the neighbours"—better begin. At the door he caught a reflection of himself in the glass over the mantelpiece. Changed—he was changed already, and not merely through the loss of his moustache. There were new lines round his mouth, and his shoulders seemed to be higher. Was he unconsciously cultivating a stoop? It didn't much matter.

He went downstairs and entered the room from which the sound of voices proceeded. Two elderly women cast the bright gaze of suspicious curiosity upon him. Katherine turned more guardedly. He had time to notice that it was all fumed oak here, too, and that the women somehow matched it. Then:

"Oh, here is my husband," said Katherine. "John, dear, this is Mrs. Pelt and Mrs. Tuckey. We all met at

Cragg's, where I went to get a little lunch, and I was just saying I must run out presently and get us some dinner, for there isn't a bite of anything in the house."

"I'm only having the neck end of a joint for my own sup-dinner, or I'd ask you both to join me," minced the woman Corbeyne gathered to be Mrs. Tuckey. She rose fussily. "If there's anything I can do to help you settle in, Mrs. Brierly, I hope you'll let me know. After all, we're quite old friends in a way, aren't we?—from you being in Ealing last year, only you were almost next door then."

"Curious how little we saw of each other, though," cut in Katherine, and from the smooth hardness of her tone Corbeyne guessed that Mrs. Tuckey had been one of those who had kept aloof from the unconvincingly husbandless newcomer.

Mrs. Tuckey's laugh was distinctly uncomfortable. She begged Corbeyne not to trouble to see her out, and when he persisted thanked him effusively. She was a thin woman with eyes like a hare's and an ill-tempered mouth. Corbeyne shut the front door on her and returned to Mrs. Pelt.

"——couldn't understand why she'd gone off so," Katherine was saying as he returned to the sitting-room, "but if Mr. Tuckey *does*—well—as you say—it's no wonder, is it?"

Corbeyne sat down by the window and watched Katherine. A petty triumph sparkled in her eyes and gave lightness to her movements. In a patch of sunlight he saw her face clearly at last. It had changed more than he had thought at first; there were lines that wiped out the still arresting beauty of the eyes, and in repose the lips were too full, even a little loose . . . Presently he found himself listening to the talk.

"I must certainly give some kind of housewarming as soon as I've got a girl and made the place a bit more homelike with cushions and things; these furnished

places are so *bare*, aren't they? Then I'll ask a few people in and you'll bring your son, won't you?—to help us entertain them. Wonderfully, he plays, I always think, quite professional. Let me see, who else is there I could ask? It's very odd how few people I got to know when I was here before, I'm sure I don't know why. I really used to feel sometimes as though I'd done something wrong and was being shunned for it."

How she harped on that line of malice; to make colourless women colourlessly uncomfortable—for this she had smashed two lives and refused wealth and sold her salvation. Corbeyne studied her. She was elaborately dressed. In comparison with her rustling silks, Mrs. Pelt's rather bedraggled gown showed up badly; rather pathetically, Corbeyne thought. He broke into Katherine's monologue with a question as to the talents of Mrs. Pelt's son who played almost as well as a professional.

"'Cello," said Mrs. Pelt, brightening somewhat. She carried an intense melancholy in voice and movement, but her eyes were shiftily alert. They went up and down Corbeyne while she expatiated on the possibilities of the 'cello, and presently by tactics he could not but admire she had edged her way to New Zealand, Corbeyne's supposed career there, and his plans for the future.

"Your work in New Zealand wasn't in any fixed place, was it, Mr. Brierly?" asked Mrs. Pelt. Her eyes suspected him before he spoke, yet his vague answer seemed to satisfy her.

Mrs. Pelt was pursuing the subject of New Zealand. It was astonishing how well informed she was as to the details of his imaginary sojourn in the Antipodes. Katherine must have invented wildly, and thrown her inventions at an unbelieving suburb; now the suburb, grudgingly, proclaimed itself willing to believe. The curl of Katherine's lip, the patronage of her tone as she

flaunted her justification, made Corbeyne sick with disgust.

Nevertheless, he was forced to accept her help during the difficult half-hour. She was quick—quicker than Sylvia would have been, because she used weapons Sylvia would have disdained.

“What a memory you’ve got for things, Mrs. Pelt! It must be two years since I told you John travelled in silks for a time, and you haven’t forgotten. And you didn’t seem very interested at the time, either.”

Mrs. Pelt rose and took her departure. To Corbeyne, at the door of the maisonette, she expressed the hope that Mrs. Brierly wouldn’t take it amiss that on her previous stay in Ealing people hadn’t run after her much. The fact was——

Corbeyne shut her out, with all her facts, and went back to the sitting-room. His mind was teased by a passing curiosity.

“Katherine, I didn’t realise you’d worked up this New Zealand lie into such a complete piece of fiction. I suppose it’s all right? Safe—and so on?”

“There’s no more than what Mrs. Pelt came out with. Old cat! She’s been storing it all up for two years.”

“What made you pick on New Zealand? It’s all so life-like, somehow.”

“Oh, well, about the time you and me—separated I knew someone who went out there and started like I said you did, travelling in silks. I lost touch with him quite soon, so I had to make things up as time went on. But it made it all right for me if anyone I knew was to know someone who’d met him out there.”

“You mean his name really *is* Brierly?” asked Corbeyne. She nodded sulkily. “I say, isn’t that rather thick? Isn’t it rather a—a liberty to take the name of a friend like that and saddle me with his personality? He may have a wife in England, he may come back himself.”

He stopped because her hand was at her heart and her attitude was imploring him not to strike her this time. God, what an insufferable defence!

"Would you prefer to dine out?" he asked desperately. "I have plenty of money—loose cash, that is to say," he added hastily, and then:

"I ought to tell you as soon as possible that I have made over all my property to my wife. That means, of course, that your five hundred a year will automatically stop. I am sorry, but I'm afraid it's one of the drawbacks of the situation."

"Oh! What shall we do!" she gasped.

"I really don't know," he answered. "I shall have to get work of some kind, I suppose."

"I—I will see what I can do," she said. "I know lots of people."

"Let us go out," he said wearily.

They went out. Katherine was sulky at first, but over dinner she began to chatter again. He listened for a while, but when he found that her talk was mere repetition of itself, he let his mind wander. He brooded over the completeness of her self-absorption. She had said not a word of Sylvia, of his parting. To a point at least she seemed genuine; she knew what she wanted, and with both hands she was seizing it. Outside the circle of her desires, heartbreak and despair might wreak a terrible vengeance on all but her. She, who had no responsive thrill for riches, for freedom, was armed in triple steel.

After dinner, they came straight back. In the maisonnette kitchen he smoked and lounged, while Katherine unpacked upstairs. He could hear her high heels tapping over the floor; she must have a large number of belongings. His head and hands were heavy with fatigue. If only he remained tired he would sleep like a log; no dreams. . . . Would this interminable day never end? Ten o'clock. He rose and went upstairs and knocked on Katherine's door. She opened it.

"I'm going to bed; I'm a bit tired. Good-night."

She made no answer. She had put on a loose wrap, so transparent and so low cut that for a second he wondered why she was in evening dress. The room behind her was in a litter. A wave of scent engulfed it and her.

"Good-night," he repeated awkwardly, and turned away. He was closing his own door behind him before she said:

"Sleep well."

For the first time there was deliberate cruelty in her voice. Almost it goaded him to anger. No, she was not worth it. He turned the key in his lock, and began to undress.

An hour later he was gulping down the whisky he had left untouched the night before. He must sleep. He *must* sleep. And to-morrow he must buy more whisky. Good stuff, whisky! He would never be able to do without it again.

CHAPTER XII

AN EVENING PARTY

THE next day passed, and the next. Katherine he gathered, was making efforts, through her friends, to get him a job, but he barely listened to her. He learnt from the paper that he had been taken ill suddenly and removed to a nursing-home where he awaited an operation. In due course, he supposed, he would leave England for a climate more suited to a permanent invalid; Mrs. Corbeyne would not accompany him. And later still, no doubt, a discreet paragraph would announce that Mrs. Corbeyne had obtained a divorce from her husband who had not defended the suit.

Upon the financial columns Corbeyne bestowed not a glance. That was all over and done with; someone of the many men competent to do so had probably already taken up the threads of his work. Good luck to him whoever he was! Corbeyne bought a pile of novels second-hand and read them diligently in the fumed oak sitting-room. He smoked a great deal, and he had laid in a good supply of whisky.

Katherine's activities were more pronounced. She engaged a servant, who could not cook, but who dressed like a stage parlourmaid, and could usher in callers with more than stage insolence. Meals were scrappy, and on the first day Corbeyne, used to a careful, perfectly cooked diet, felt surprisingly faint somewhere

about three o'clock ; the second day was better ; he went out, and had coffee and a roll in the middle of the morning, and the faintness merged into a fatigue that soon ceased to be remarkable.

On the evening of the third day Katherine celebrated her "house-warming." Two side tables in the sitting-room were covered with the sandwiches and confectionery, which Corbeyne normally connected with tea-time, and there was iced coffee and *coupe Jacques*. Corbeyne was eyeing the repast in wonder when Katherine rustled in. Her dress appeared to Corbeyne to consist of a handful of dark green sequins, a band of fur, and a red velvet rose.

"Why, John, you aren't dressed!"

"I'm very sorry," he apologised, "I didn't bring a dress suit. I didn't think it was necessary. I'd better not appear to-night, perhaps."

"Oh, but you *must*!" cried Katherine sharply. "I don't know why you should have thought you wouldn't need evening dress, I'm sure."

"Do you think the other people will wear it?" ventured Corbeyne. "I should hardly think——"

"What on earth does it matter whether they wear it or not?" snapped Katherine. "We can do as we like, I s'pose! You'll have to go out and get a suit and come in later, that's all. I'll say you've been detained in the City."

Corbeyne stared. Then he grasped the nature of the proposition. She meant a ready-made suit. No doubt Mr. Tuckey owned one, and the almost professional Mr. Pelt.

"Certainly," he said, "I can just do it before the shops shut."

He did it. It was not really much of an ordeal. The salesman assured him of the perfect fit of the purchase, and Corbeyne did not flinch.

Within an hour he had put on the ready-made, and entered the sitting-room. A small, rather stout man

was playing the 'cello; Mr. Pelt presumably. Mrs. Pelt was at the piano. Mr. Pelt played with his eyes on the ceiling, and when any of the other guests—who were partaking of refreshments—chinked with plates or glasses, he winced and sighed. He was not in evening dress, nor were any of the other men. Corbeyne was not sure what the women were wearing except for two young girls who were dressed rather like Katherine.

The "piece" came to an end. Mr. Pelt rose and smiled at the enthusiasm of the audience. Then he caught sight of Corbeyne by the door and stared rather.

"My husband," put in Katherine. "John, dear, come and be introduced to everybody."

The introductions were duly accomplished, and then Katherine proposed "Postman's Knock." A giggling girl and a surly youth were sent out into the hall. Mr. Pelt buttonholed Corbeyne.

"Things look dark one way and another," he remarked.

Corbeyne gave him his attention. Pelt was small and stout, certainly, but there was something pushful about him, something confidentially solid, that set him apart from the other men in the room. Corbeyne remembered that Mr. Pelt was "something in the City."

"What is your own opinion?" he asked. "You're in the swim, I understand."

Mr. Pelt expanded.

"Well, I should hardly say that, hardly that. I'm secretary to Catlett and Son—old Catlett's one of the Deagle push y'know—yes—you know the name, of course?"

Corbeyne assented. He had a faint impression that he did know the name of Catlett and Son, and Deagle was certainly familiar. He tried to remember the connection and pulled himself up. What was the use of inventing tortures? Mr. Pelt was giving his views on the outlook in the City.

"Grave, very grave, and from things that have come my way, likely to be graver. Corbeyne's illness was ill-timed, very, though no surprise to *me*. When I saw him last——"

"Er—you know Corbeyne, then?"

"Oh yes. Yes. Known him for years. He wouldn't admit it now, doesn't recognise old acquaintances *now*, y'know, but there was a day when he and I——"

The usual lie, thought Corbeyne with relief.

"Talking of Corbeyne, you're extraordinarily like him," said Pelt presently. "Except that he's got a moustache, and he's a bit taller. But you've been told all that before, no doubt?"

"No, I don't think so. But then no one I've met since my return beside yourself knows Corbeyne even by sight, so they can't judge."

Pelt expanded further; he was working up a genial interest in his host's previous career, when Mrs. Pelt interrupted them.

"Now, Mr. Brierly and Robert, you can't discuss finance here. Mr. Brierly, go and sit by Miss Harrison. Robert——"

The evening was a great success.

It was after midnight before the last guest departed.

"Well, *that* went off all right," declared Katherine when at last she was alone with Corbeyne. "Mrs. Harrison opened her eyes at this room, I can tell you! She and her daughter think no end of themselves and their house, they've got a little money, you know, but they've nothing like these cushions and things. Mrs. Harrison kept saying might she copy some of them."

Corbeyne looked round the room. For the first time he saw how full it was of black and gold cushions and bits of Chinese embroidery and chased silver boxes lined with sandalwood. Katherine was talking, but he was not listening. He leant heavily against the mantel-piece, opened a silver box, stared at its emptiness, and

shut it again. Soon he would be able to have a whisky. Katherine's voice went on and on.

"Well, I'm going up," she said suddenly. "Good-night."

She had come up behind him, and he felt her bare arm across his back. In the mirror he could see her eyes. He stood motionless.

"Good-night," he said formally.

Her hand closed on his arm; her head moved till her cheek lay against his shoulder.

"John——"

"Good-night, Katherine."

In the mirror he saw her grasp her miserable weapons. She stepped back from him in the pose of the woman whose love has been kicked aside.

"Oh, I'm so unhappy," she snivelled. "Oh, dear, and I'm not well, either; what's the good of it all if I'm to be shut out of your life? Shut out of your life——" evidently the phrase pleased her—"as if all that has been hadn't been. As if I hadn't suffered cruelly, unfairly as you can't deny, while you had all that life could give you——"

There was a great deal of it. It was nearly two o'clock before, exhausted, she dragged herself up to bed; before Corbeyne could get at his whisky.

CHAPTER XIII

ASPHALT AND WHISKY

THE next day passed, and the next; and the next. Weeks passed.

Corbeyne finished the second-hand novels, and took to going for walks by himself. He went for miles along the main roads, past rows and rows of villas, and numerous shops and churches and cinemas. Asphalt—there was something about asphalt that made things more consistent; asphalt and whisky, they were the things to stick to. When it rained, he turned into a cinema and sat there, dozing, for he got little sleep at night unless he drank and drank.

He escorted Katherine to the houses of her friends and called for her about eleven, and came in and just passed a few words with Katherine's hostess, but otherwise Katherine had ceased to make social demands on him. When "visitors," as she called them, came to tea, she was content for him to be in his room; and gradually, from her manner and those of her guests, he gathered that, having established himself and her as quite nice people, he was now of more use as a subject of whispered conversation. Disgusted, he shut his ears to the half-sentences that came his way. He gathered that Katherine was exploiting his coldness to her in order to keep interest alive in her. Evidently the cushions and little boxes in themselves were not enough.

"If you enjoy being a little better off than your acquaintances why didn't you have a better time when you were here before?" he asked her one night after their so-called dinner. "After all, only the Pelts, I should say, have five hundred a year, and you had your five hundred all to yourself."

"Yes, and where was I to say it came from?" she countered. "If I'd lived on all my money they'd have hounded me out of the place, when, as it was, with me managing on two-hundred that I said was a hundred and fifty you allowed me, they as good as said they'd like to see your cheque for it! I spent all my money before, when I was in Bristol, and there was a woman there——"

Corbeyne looked out of the window. This was almost certain to end in a scene. Scenes were frequent now, always on the old, old lines; Katherine never varied her technique, and Corbeyne was willing to believe that by now most of Katherine's circle knew her for a miserably ill-treated woman, and him for an uncouth, selfish, fault-finding brute.

"It isn't as though you were taking any steps to see about our future," droned Katherine. "I know you can't bear me to interfere, as no doubt you call it, but how am I to know from day to day what's in front of us——"

Corbeyne was hazily reckoning up the weeks. He had been with her now—how long?—nearly a month! He couldn't remember the date and the morning's paper, still folded, lay so that the date was hidden. It had become no effort at all to leave the paper unopened day after day. At first there had been an impulse to keep in touch, a certain exiled curiosity; but that had passed . . . like hope. . . .

"And it isn't as though people didn't know you drink as you do, not that I've breathed a word, but Mabel's always gossiping with the girl downstairs, and you don't know how it *frightens* me to think where you may end——"

This evening he had encountered Pelt, coming home from the City. An objectionable individual, suspicious, inquisitive, fantastically self-assured. He had breathed importantly of industrial stress and falling markets, but Corbeyne had jerked himself away. No doubt it was all in the paper; if only opening the paper and reading it weren't against the code of lethargy and delay to which one clung.

"I'm sure I go in terror of you nowadays, John, for though you don't mean it your temper is awful, and if you were to turn on me no one would be more sorry for you than I——"

Something snapped in Corbeyne's brain. The unread morning paper, the clock that had stopped days ago, the maddening little silver boxes, the woman's dreary monotone all rose up and flung themselves upon his consciousness and his consciousness snarled defiance. . . . He found that his fingers were gripping her shoulders, that she was crying out, that he, the tyrant of her deliberate creation, was glad to hurt her. . . .

"Katherine, what do you think prevents my killing first you and then myself? What do I stand to lose? Nothing. I've lost everything there was. If you value your life, I warn you, don't drive me any further."

Under the vice of his hands she collapsed. The soft, warm weight of her lay against his shoulder. The beastly, clinging, luscious scent she used was all about him. Her eyes were gleaming.

"Be nice to me then," she whispered.

Corbeyne heard himself laugh suddenly, and then as suddenly stop. Nice. Yes. Why not? 'Mr. Brierly' must make what bargains he could with the Devil, mustn't he? Didn't they all haggle and cheat and complain every inch of the way, these poor wretches who were so utterly damned? And he, too, that had been John Corbeyne, was he not of his own choice one of them?

"Be nice to me, John. D'you remember when you fell in love with me? . . . Be like that again."

Why not? He lifted her a little towards him, hearing her uneven breath. He looked at her. There was paint on her face. Again, why not? He would not be the first man to seek forgetfulness in a painted face.

Her arms crept round him and he shuddered with a faint nausea. He did not loosen his clasp. The nausea would pass, he knew, and then would come a brief forgetfulness. He would let her arms go on creeping, creeping, until they choked the last memory of him who had been Sylvia's husband.

Strange thoughts flitted through his brain. As she had bidden, he was remembering when he fell in love with her. He was slipping backwards over the years, slipping too fast—too fast——

He tore his eyes from hers and searched the tawdry room for something—something safe. . . .

RUN ON PRIVATE BAN

"You and me could be as happy as anything, John," she crooned—"like we used to be before you drifted away from me. Look at me, John. John, what is it?"

RUN ON PRIVATE BAN—Irritating, that folded paper with the headline cut in half like that. What bank? Surely not Gorlay's? He must know.

"John——"

He put her aside. She had abruptly ceased to matter. Mr. Brierly had gone spinning into infinity. *What bank and why?* He reached for the paper, opened it. A month was wiped out in the space of a moment.

"RUN ON PRIVATE BANK."

"GORLAY'S BESIEGED."

Behind him Katherine felt for a handkerchief and worked up the scene anew.

Corbeyne heard it as from a great distance. He had begun to read. Presently he sat down in the precarious armchair. Katherine sobbed herself from the room unheeded.

John Corbeyne read on and frowned and muttered as he read.

"Fools!" he gasped. "The other banks should have made a run on Gorlay's impossible. Gorlay's is as sound as any of them. In five minutes I could get the Prime Minister. . . ."

"God, I can do nothing—nothing—nothing!"

Through the night into the dawn he sat in the precarious armchair, staring at reality.

Morning found him haggard and unshaved, listening to Mabel's noisy arrival and then the clatter of crockery in the preparation of breakfast. He did not want breakfast. He strode out of the house to the railway station.

Later he stood by the queue that stretched down Cheapside from the doors of Gorlay's, gazing helplessly at the wreckage he knew he could have averted.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ARTIST IN BLUSTER

WITHIN twelve hours of Corbeyne's departure from his home, Lord Carfax decided that Corbeyne should have appendicitis. He had used a number of diseases in the course of his professional career and had found appendicitis by far the best of all. One could be seized suddenly with it. One could recover from it within a week or so—one could have a prolonged convalescence—or one need never recover from it at all.

Appendicitis was undoubtedly the safest complaint for John Corbeyne. He himself broke it to the Prime Minister soon after breakfast. By the time the evening papers were ready for copy he had a moving little domestic incident ready for them.

Then he went round to talk it over with Sylvia.

At first he thought Sylvia was taking it splendidly. Then he began to be alarmed about her.

He had expected to find her drooping, wan, listless, and instead he found her vital. He greeted her in a hushed voice, and she slightly elevated her eyebrows as if she did not understand why he did so. His own buoyancy had gone, and for the first time in his life he looked her elderly guardian.

"I hope you are taking care of yourself, my dear—proper care, I mean," he said with ponderous solicitude.

"I'm quite all right, Jim," she assured him. "I've

no need to take special care. Things—don't make me ill physically."

Carfax looked at her doubtfully and was silent. Presently he jerked out:

"I'm afraid we shall have to discuss it, Sylvia. I must tell you my plans."

"Of course!" she said. Her tone was perfectly matter-of-fact. For his part he was old-fashioned enough to expect her to use her handkerchief at every reference to the subject of her husband.

"I've given out to the Prime Minister and the Press that he's been seized with appendicitis and has had to undergo an immediate operation," said Carfax. "His election has been provisionally fixed for the second week in next month—that is, we have about five weeks."

He saw her wince at that, and felt a veritable elephant for having hurt her by some unperceived carelessness.

"Five weeks!" she repeated. "Why five weeks? And what has the election to do with it?"

"I spent the whole night thinking about it, Sylvia," he answered. "Scarcely slept a wink. I was pretty upset, and there was a beastly little dog howling somewhere. And doors kept banging. A perfectly awful night! And I figured it out that it's up to us to play for time—all the time we can get.

"You see," he went on, "I said last night that John was mad. I believe he was mad in a sense. It's an awful thing to have to discuss with you, my dear, but—quite decent and honourable men do go mad like that sometimes.

"They may have the best of wives—as he had—they may know it—as I honestly believe he did know it—and yet they get bitten with a sort of virus. The virus runs its course—um—ah—to drop metaphor, my dear, a decent man runs off with some apple-cheeked, simpering dairy-maid and after a few days comes to his senses and sees what a fool and a cad he has made of himself."

Carfax found the theme a promising one, and was warming up to a rhapsody.

"I believe that John was, in a way, off his head through overwork. It's happened before. Often feel a bit of an ass myself, though not that way. With me, if I have a frightfully stiff season, it takes the form of buying bull-dogs. My point is that John is dead certain to wake up in a week or two and realise what he's done. Well, we must keep the coast clear for him. Give him a safe retreat. Build a silver bridge—I mean, enable him to return in the easiest possible manner with no scandal. In a word—appendicitis!"

Lord Carfax had expected approbation. Sylvia's expression did not change, and he suddenly noticed that her eyes seemed hard.

"And I must bear you out in this deception!" she said slowly. "For the sake of his career! I must just wait, and pretend I'm nursing him, and perhaps he will come back."

"You don't want him back!" said Carfax uneasily. How strange she looked, he thought, and yet how normal! Those eyes of hers! He was eminently unpoetical, but in the depths of him he found himself muttering a tag that had survived from Oxford days—"Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel, hard eyes that grow soft for an hour." Would they ever grow soft again, he wondered.

"My personal feelings hardly come into it, do they, Jim?"

The question took him aback. He thought it wiser to answer it truthfully.

"Frankly, they don't, my dear," he said, with something which perilously approached tenderness. "Nor do mine. It's as if the country were at war—think of him as a General. There are no shots being fired in this part of Europe at present, but it is at war in a sense. It's menaced in a hundred ways, this country and all the others. It's going through a period

of mad economic anarchy, and he's one of the few who can lead the way to order. I'm not great on the humanitarian tack, but we've simply got to set aside our own feelings in this and—make it easy for him to return."

"Yes, I quite see, Jim, and I'm ready to help you all I can. Write my lies out for me so that I shan't contradict myself."

Hard, he thought, and cynical—much too hard for Sylvia. With a sigh he assented and left.

On that day began a strange partnership—an almost official affair—between Sylvia and Lord Carfax. When she told him about Corbeyne's Deed of Gift of his entire property, Carfax wavered in his belief of an early return, but stoutly maintained that the incident proved his point. He came to see her regularly three times a week, then twice. He would not admit it to himself, though it was none the less a fact, that those visits were an ordeal.

"You're living on your nerves, my dear," he told her once.

"I am not, Jim. I'm a perfectly sensible, well-balanced matron, who has lived in a fool's paradise, and has come down to earth."

Lord Carfax looked pained and puzzled. It was not difficult for her to read his thoughts.

"I know what you're thinking, Jim. I'll set your doubts at rest. I shall never have him back as—my husband. But—if he does come back here—I promise you I will take no steps to prevent his being of use to the nation."

The weeks dragged on. Lord Carfax cheerfully abused the trust placed in him by the Press, and issued progressive bulletins anent Corbeyne's health, while with one eye he looked askance at the effect that was already being produced by the inactivity of the man who had been marked down by the Government and the City as the first Minister of Credit.

Gorlay came to see him once or twice, and increased his gloom. On the day before the run on the bank, Gorlay revealed the full horror of the position.

Gorlay's explanation was technical in the extreme, but Carfax grasped the gist of it. Largely owing to the unexpected action of a foreign power, Gorlay's Bank would have to meet heavy liabilities in the next few days. The other banks were standing aloof. They had told him with polite cruelty that the day of the private bank had passed. But could Carfax get at Corbeyne? If Corbeyne would send a properly authenticated message to the Prime Minister, pressure might yet be brought to bear upon the banking community as a whole.

Feeling a sneak of the first water, Carfax undertook to do his best. When Gorlay had left, he faced the fact that there was no best he could do. Corbeyne had been away nearly a month now, and as yet he had made no sign. Had the madness failed to run its course? Was it all nonsense—the theory of Corbeyne's madness?

He went to the Prime Minister himself but accomplished nothing. He toyed with the idea of forging a document purporting to come from Corbeyne who, as Gorlay assured him, knew that Gorlay's bank was really in a thoroughly solvent position, though Gorlay's could no more stand a run than any other bank. Then he went round and told Sylvia all about it.

He was chagrined to find Sylvia almost unsympathetic.

"I am very sorry for poor Mr. Gorlay," she said. "But there is absolutely nothing that I can do. I can lend him some of John's money—all of it, if required. I suppose he has a moral right to it."

"It wouldn't see him through," said Carfax.

There the matter dropped. Sylvia even began to talk of other things.

"In the Deed of Gift he made in my favour," said Sylvia, "there is no mention of his first wife. I am

going to ask the bank if she wishes her allowance to be continued. I am quite willing to do so."

Carfax returned an indifferent answer. He was thinking of Gorlay's.

Gorlay did not see him the next day—the first day of the run. Carfax heard about it before anything had been published. He tortured himself with the picture of Gorlay pacing his office telling his partner that Carfax would drag Corbeyne from a sick bed to the rescue of the bank.

On the second day he could stand the strain of inactivity no longer. Always a little muddled in any thinking process that did not bear directly upon advertisement, he had begun to accuse himself of being at least partly responsible for the impending ruin of Gorlay's. If he could do nothing to save Gorlay's but bluster, he would bluster. He could do it better than anyone in the kingdom—what had they given him his peerage for? Bluster! And he was going to bluster at that queue of frightened imbeciles who were dragging a good man to needless ruin.

He jumped into a taxi and made for the City.

"Get alongside that queue," he told the driver. "I'm going to climb on to your roof and knock a bit of horse sense into these idiots."

The taximan protested, unheeded by Lord Carfax who was concentrating his energies on the difficult task of getting his foot on the window ledge. He would have succeeded, but for the policeman.

There was nothing for it but to pay the taxi and look round for another point of vantage.

Suddenly he stopped looking for the point of vantage and stared instead at a tall heavy man, haggard, unbrushed and unshaved.

"John—John Corbeyne!"

It was an exclamation of horror, delight, surprise and incredulity.

CHAPTER XV

LORD CARFAX'S DISCOVERY

THE suddenness of the encounter made Lord Carfax a little dizzy. By their side the silent, grim-visaged queue, menacing yet pathetic, the unconcerned rumble of the traffic, the hovering impassive policeman—all seemed as a setting to the astounding fact of John Corbeyne. Lord Carfax snatched at the other's sleeve.

The man he addressed as Corbeyne shook him off none too gently and stepped back.

"I think you're making a mistake," said the unshaved man gruffly. "I do not know you."

"But—my dear fellow——"

Carfax stared with a ludicrous intensity. There, unless he was in the grip of an hallucination, stood Corbeyne before him. The features of the man he had known so well were unmistakable. He was Corbeyne. Corbeyne ill, shabby, unwashed, altogether "fuggy"—but Corbeyne.

"You really must excuse me," said Corbeyne stiffly. "I have told you that you have made a mistake. If you won't accept my assurance——"

"Nah then, what's this again?" demanded the hovering policeman, no longer impassive.

"It's nothing. This gentleman whom I've never seen before has mistaken me for one of his friends—that's all," said Corbeyne, turning away.

Carfax followed. It was a breathless process, but he stuck to it. While he panted along, keeping Corbeyne a dozen feet ahead of him, he strove to arrange his thoughts. With a low muttering he stated his case to himself. 'When I was looking at that chap I thought he was John Corbeyne. He *is* John Corbeyne. Take my dying oath! Silly ass, that policeman! Damned insolence!'

He was puffing into High Holborn. "What the dickens was Sylvia saying the other day about some German philosopher johnny? . . . Freud! That's it! Yes, yes. 'Tyranny of the subconscious! Auto-suggestion!' . . . Ah! Make yourself see things you really want to see without knowing you're pulling your own leg. . . . If I've fallen for that sort of thing it's overwork. All this worry about Gorlay's! And dreaming of Corbeyne! . . . 'stead of bull-dogs, I s'pose! Good lord! I might have thought the policeman was Corbeyne in disguise. Damn that German johnny!"

Corbeyne stopped to look in the window of a typewriter store. Lord Carfax perforce stopped, too, and peered.

"Ease up on the subconscious!" he adjured himself. "Is that Corbeyne or isn't it? Yes. . . . No. Yes. The 'ayes' have it? . . . Good *night*, he's wearing slippers! Corbeyne indeed! Still, it's a most amazing likeness. No wonder I fell for it! Anyone would have! Auto-damrot-suggestion! Nix on that German johnny!"

It was in the moment of Lord Carfax's triumph over the shadowy, Austrian philosopher that the latter secured his victory. Auto-suggestion is a two-edged sword that cuts both ways.

Lord Carfax was thrown head-over-heels by the posterously simple logical platitude that if the subconsciousness could lead him to believe a man to be John Corbeyne who was not John Corbeyne it could

equally lead him to believe that a man who *was* John Corbeyne was *not* John Corbeyne—especially when the subconsciousness was assisted by the emphatic denial of the man himself, by a bristly and haggard face, and by a pair of slippers at ten-thirty a.m. in High Holborn.

“Now if I was mistaken apart from this psychology flapdoodle——”

Lord Carfax was a muddle-headed philosopher, but he had obtained a peerage for bluster. Gorlay's, Corbeyne, Sylvia, the Cabinet and the City blazed into coruscating catherine wheels and in the thousandth of a second merged into one bright, scintillating Big Idea—a stunt for the greatest bluster the world had ever known—a bluster that would snatch the country from the jaws of economic chaos through the instrumentality of him, James Carfax, baron.

On the wings of the wind, crushing beneath his feet the roses strewn by a grateful posterity, Lord Carfax strode up to the man who, he had thoroughly convinced himself, bore a really striking resemblance to John Corbeyne.

“Pardon me for accosting you again, sir,” he said with the utmost formality. “My name is Carfax—Lord Carfax. I would be most grateful if you could spare me a few minutes conversation. I assure you that it is a matter of the very greatest importance to me.”

CHAPTER XVI

HE INTRODUCES THE HUSBAND—

JOHAN CORBEYNE, run to earth by Lord Carfax, groped for his bearings. He was staggered by the fact that Carfax had apparently accepted his denial of identity. Instinctively he glanced at a mirror in the typewriter window. . . . Perhaps it wasn't so remarkable, after all.

Quickly he tackled the existing position. A stranger, thus accosted, with an urgent request for no more than a few minutes' conversation, would be churlish indeed to refuse—especially as immediate guarantees of good faith were furnished. In his own particular case refusal would certainly convince Lord Carfax of his identity.

"Certainly, Lord Carfax," he answered. "My name is Brierly. I'm afraid I haven't a card."

He made no attempt to disguise his voice. If Carfax believed he was not himself his one chance of sustaining the illusion lay in behaving with perfect naturalness.

"Thank you very much," said Carfax. "Will you come across the road to the Cardinal? I frequently take a private room there when I have work to do in the City, and we can talk there undisturbed."

Corbeyne agreed. As they walked the few yards to the restaurant, he tried to puzzle out what Carfax could want of a stranger who was remarkably like

Corbeyne. He knew Carfax's moods pretty well, and he knew that the present mood was one of suppressed excitement.

In the private room in the old Cardinal Inn it was not long before he caught the drift of Carfax's purpose.

"Have you heard of John Corbeyne, the financier?" began Carfax.

"Oh yes, of course!" said Corbeyne. He was surprised by the polite indifference of his voice. Acting was not difficult, after all.

"Well—I mistook you for Mr. Corbeyne when I very rudely, I fear, grabbed you by the arm. I addressed you as 'John'—his name. I thought you were John Corbeyne, though now, at close quarters, I can see you are not. But I wasn't positive until you stopped to look in that shop."

"Oh!" said Corbeyne.

"And of course there's the moustache. Corbeyne wears a moustache, and you're—er—clean shaved, as it were. I simply thought that you were Corbeyne, and that you'd—er—shaved. The resemblance is absolutely amazing. They say everyone has a double, though I thought it all tommy-rot myself. You and Corbeyne each have one, anyhow." Carfax stopped to get his breath.

So *that* was what Carfax had got hold of, thought Corbeyne! He had bitten on to the "double" theory and had already built some plan round it. The recognition danger was removed for the present, at any rate. If Carfax ever deceived the public he always began by deceiving himself. It had become an essential part of his art—he was extremely good at it.

There was a pause. Corbeyne had the impression that Carfax was nerving himself.

"Mr. Brierly, I'm going to tell you a yarn," he rapped out. "Not for the fun of the thing. The yarn will affect you—it'll get up and hit you before I've finished. Will you listen?"

Corbeyne nodded. There was no reasonable alternative.

"You probably know a good bit about John Corbeyne. Enough to believe me when I say that he is marked down to be the first Minister of Credit. I don't know how much you understand of City affairs—high finance and all that. Perhaps you know more than I do. In that case you'll know that John Corbeyne stands in an absolutely unique position. There's all this trouble with foreign exchanges for one thing, and complications with America, for another. Then there's Gorlay's.

"Now the Prime Minister, for whom I'm working at present, than whom there's not a sounder judge of international opinion living—the Prime Minister is absolutely convinced that Corbeyne alone of any man in Europe can start trade humming again. I don't mean—he doesn't mean—an engineered boom. He means the restoration of normal conditions. It isn't that Corbeyne is so much cleverer than anybody else. It's simply that he is about the only man in high financial circles whom every other man trusts implicitly. He alone can count on the big houses accepting his lead and giving him their whole-hearted support. Take the run on Gorlay's, for instance. Corbeyne could stop that with his little finger."

"Indeed!" put in Corbeyne. "I had no idea the Prime Minister—I had no idea that Mr. Corbeyne was as important as that." It was more of an effort now to speak naturally.

"It is impossible to exaggerate his importance," said Carfax. "It's as if that man held in the hollow of his hand the prosperity of the coming generation. Of course, in a sense, he's a fly on the wheel, brilliant man though he is. But he's a vital fly—cog—damn these metaphors! they always let you down—I mean, the wheel won't go round without him, if you understand me."

Corbeyne was still in the dark.

"This is very interesting, Lord Carfax," he said.

"You mean, you're getting tired," returned Carfax eagerly. "Just hold on a minute. I'm going to tell you a political secret, Mr. Brierly, which only two other living persons know."

Corbeyne elevated his eyebrows.

"Good lord, that's just what Corbeyne does!" exclaimed Carfax. "You even have his expression! Sorry! I was going to tell you that John Corbeyne has bolted."

"Bolted!" Corbeyne tried to register what he deemed a requisite amount of surprise. "Do you mean he's financially involved?"

"No, sir, I don't," snapped Carfax. "I almost wish I did. Corbeyne has chucked up his career and turned a deaf ear to the nation's need of him for the sake of a rotten intrigue with some woman."

Corbeyne made an incoherent sound and was relieved to find that it passed as an exclamation of disapproval.

"I couldn't believe it at first, but it's true," said Carfax. "He cleared out a month ago. That appendicitis stuff is just my guff. The only thing I know about him is that he won't show up again. He's clean cut the painter, and——"

Lord Carfax snatched himself from the verge of another metaphor.

"John Corbeyne was my friend," said Lord Carfax. "He married my ward—one of the best women alive. Until a month ago there was not a man in the world whom I liked and respected more. I am saying nothing about the fact that he has behaved like an unutterable cad to his wife. That's personal. As an Englishman I say that John Corbeyne is a dirty traitor."

Corbeyne put his hand up to his collar, then dropped it again.

"This is very distressing, naturally," he said with

a nervous laugh. "But why are you telling me all this, Lord Carfax?"

"Can't you see, man?" demanded Lord Carfax.

"No," lied Corbeyne.

"Think over what I've just told you. It was Corbeyne as a figurehead who was needed far more than Corbeyne as a financier. I've known the man intimately for over ten years. I mistake you for him. That means that everybody on earth but his wife would mistake you for him, too."

Corbeyne laughed, a long, throaty laugh.

"I see. You are suggesting that I should impersonate John Corbeyne?"

"I am," said Carfax. "I'm suggesting just that. I can fix it if you'll agree. Will you do it?"

"It's a very startling proposition."

"Of course it is!" said Carfax. "I've spent twenty years of an active life dealing with startling propositions, Mr. Brierly. This is the most startling I've handled yet. But it's also the easiest."

"It sounds impossibly difficult," said Corbeyne. He felt trapped. *Corbeyne was a dirty traitor.*

"Leave the difficulty to me," rapped out Carfax. "I can stage-manage the whole affair, and all you have to do is to repeat your lines, which will be very simple. Being photographed will be your job chiefly, and signing things. Somehow or other you'll have to forge his signature. It won't be a criminal forgery. I'll see that you don't stand in any danger of the criminal law. The utmost you'll risk is making a fool of yourself, and we'll pay you handsomely for that risk. You could save Gorlay's. I happen to know they can stand the run to-day, but they'll break to-morrow. Will you do it?"

Corbeyne did not answer. He simply could not find the words.

"Look here," said Carfax, with a greater earnestness than Corbeyne, in all those years of association, had

ever observed before. "I'm not a religious man and I'm not a superstitious man. But I admit that I see some strange hand at work in my running into you to-day. Looked at in one way, it's a blind coincidence. For the last month I've been driven pretty well off my head by Corbeyne's disappearance. I've spent night after night toying with mad ideas about getting someone else to take his place. This morning I run into you, the very living image of Corbeyne, complete to his voice, even to some of his gestures. Upset me! Made a fool of myself! Thought you *were* Corbeyne when I ought to have had more sense. Subconsciousness, y'know—auto-suggestion and all that! Now, it's just a blind coincidence if you look at it one way, but it's too amazing really to be coincidence. I've got the feeling—well, you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes," said Corbeyne. "I see what you mean. It occurs to me—you are probably—right."

"Then you will do it?" demanded Carfax for the third time.

"What about—his wife?"

"No danger at all! I've told you she's one of the best women alive. She is. She's suffered terribly. She's genuinely concerned at the thought that her husband has let his country down. She would do anything to help me put that right. She would acknowledge you in public as her husband if she were convinced that it were best for the country for her to do so!"

Corbeyne took a deep breath. He was shaking. To see Sylvia, speak with her; to——

"As a patriot, Mr. Brierly?" pleaded Lord Carfax. "It's in your power to undo the terrible harm that John Corbeyne has tried to do. Will you——"

Corbeyne was a dirty traitor.

"Yes," cried Corbeyne, wheeling round.

"Thank God!" broke from Carfax as the two men gripped hands.

CHAPTER XVII

—TO THE WIFE

AS soon as the decision was taken, Lord Carfax became a somewhat loose-knotted bundle of energy and enthusiasm.

"It's one of those things that carry themselves by their own weight," he rhapsodised. "No one looks at a man to see if he's the man he says he is when there's absolutely no reason to suppose the contrary. It's the subconsciousness that sees you through. Auto-suggestion on a big scale. For instance, if I took someone and whispered darkly '*Is this Corbeyne?*' he'd find out at once that you were not Corbeyne. But I am not going to whisper, nor is anyone else. You'll have to get a moustache, though—and let your hair grow a bit—it will grow, I suppose? Then I'll have to coach you in the part. You'll have to memorise a few figures and things like that, but you probably won't find that difficult. All that's just trimming. I know for a fact Corbeyne had got his plans cut and dried. We must get the essentials fixed first. I've got an appointment with the Prime Minister at five and we'll fix Gorlay's then. Can't do anything now. Have to coach you first."

He pulled out his watch.

"I say, will you be back here in an hour's time? I'll bring Mrs. Corbeyne along and introduce you.

"There's one little matter we'd better get off our chests," Carfax added. "Compensation for your throwing up your present work—the amount we are to pay you, and so forth. Of course, there's no possibility of a wrangle. We are bound to pay you practically anything you like to ask."

"I've no desire to exploit the nation's necessity," said Corbeyne. "I can leave those matters with you. You need not pay me compensation for the loss of my work. I—I was about to resign it. In any case, who would pay my salary?"

"Very public-spirited of you!" said Lord Carfax. "Who would pay it? Why, I'd be responsible for it's payment myself, of course, but I think that Mrs. Corbeyne—she's been left in control of her husband's fortune—I think she would be very glad to make a substantial payment in view of the fact that you will be saving his name, if nothing else, from becoming a by-word."

Corbeyne winced.

"Suppose we say fifty pounds a week to carry on with?" suggested Carfax. "When the stunt is finished I'll guarantee you a gratuity of at least five thousand. Mrs. Corbeyne will probably insist on making it more. Ah—in the meantime—here's a tenner on account." Lord Carfax glanced at the slippers.

Corbeyne did his best to murmur thanks.

"I shall be back here before you are," he said.

When Carfax had gone Corbeyne went out, washed, shaved and bought a pair of shoes. Back in the private room of the Cardinal he lit a cigar. For a moment he twirled it restlessly in his jaw. Then he gave vent to bitter, ironic laughter.

What a ludicrous mix-up it all was! Everything that Lord Carfax thought would be difficult would be profoundly easy, and the one thing he thought offered no difficulty at all would quite probably kill the whole scheme.

Sylvia!

Corbeyne had taken it for granted from the first mention of her name that Sylvia would refuse to believe that he was his own double. The absence of a moustache, and cropped hair might work on Carfax—for once he had conceived the idea of a double he had done the rest of the deception himself—but it certainly wouldn't work on her. Then why had he let himself be swept into the fantastic scheme?

"It's in your power to undo the terrible harm that John Corbeyne has tried to do."

Carfax's words had been a bit of an eye-opener. Carfax had called him a dirty traitor—and had justified the charge. Corbeyne felt a dull flush mount to his cheeks. He had never contemplated earning the name of traitor.

If those words were justified—if he really was indispensable to the nation—he must convict himself of that inverted vanity which is called mock-modesty. In considering the effects of his sudden withdrawal, he had foreseen a nuisance to Carfax and annoyance in the Cabinet. He had imagined that anyone of twenty or thirty personalities in the city could easily have stepped into his shoes. He had believed that the portfolio had only come his way because a richer financier would not bother with the work.

"It was Corbeyne as a figure-head that was needed far more than Corbeyne as a financier."

It had struck him as a rather curious way of looking at himself. While Carfax's eager appeal had rushed along its course, Corbeyne had withdrawn a part of his attention and switched it on to a review of his own career. Impartially, he had seen at once a certain justification for the phrase.

For a successful financier he was not a particularly rich man. Yet he had floated and engineered a large number of gigantic undertakings. Perhaps the fact that he had not himself made a huge fortune in the

process was one of the reasons why men were prepared to follow his lead. It was a cynical explanation, but he supposed it was the true one.

And so he had made up his mind. If only one hundredth of what Carfax had said about the nation's need for him were true, it was his duty to submit Sylvia and himself to the ordeal of a meeting.

The few minutes in which he had still to wait for Carfax to return were the longest he had ever endured. He worked out all Carfax's plans for him, together with his own, and still had time to spare. He became restless and then nervous. He indulged in the dangerous pastime of inventing what he would say and what Sylvia would reply.

She would come prepared to meet a man remarkably like him. She would see in an instant the truth. She would not, he was convinced, betray him to Lord Carfax. Her self-control had always been wonderful. But under it, she would be agonising. . . . She would face him. A woman of her calibre would face a man who had left her for the sake of a vulgar intrigue.

The door opened quite suddenly. Corbeyne sprang up. She was there. Carfax was ushering her in. Carfax was closing the door. Carfax was speaking.

"Let me introduce Mr. Brierly—Mrs. Corbeyne."

Sylvia raised her eyes and met his. Her eyes were glittering as though from fever. A sudden colour stained her white face and ebbed again. She knew him, of course. But there was not the faintest tremor of recognition in her manner as she acknowledged the introduction.

"I've been talking hard to Mrs. Corbeyne all the way here in the car," said Carfax excitedly. "As I ventured to predict, she is more than willing to help us. It will not, of course, be necessary for you to be much together, though occasionally there will be some kind of official round-up to which you will both have

to go. Mrs. Corbeyne, of course, in agreeing to the impersonation *ipso facto* agrees to your treating her as a husband would treat a wife—in public. Mrs. Corbeyne's first name is Sylvia. Yours, of course, will be John."

Corbeyne cleared his throat. He felt that he could scarcely speak.

"I would like Mrs. Corbeyne's definite assurance that she is willing to participate in this impersonation," he said. Had she started very slightly at the sound of his voice? Her own was perfectly level.

"I am more than willing, Mr. Brierly," she said. "I am intensely anxious. My husband's good name meant so much to me that now I am glad to conspire in order to sustain even the shadow of it."

"There will be a number of details you two will have to fix up," buzzed Carfax. "You will have to show up at the house from time to time, Brierly—and Mrs. Corbeyne will have to forward your letters. You'd better take a place in Town somewhere—the nearer Whitehall the better. You must have a decent place, too."

"I'll have chambers," said Corbeyne, watching Sylvia closely. "I prefer to live, as at present, in the suburbs."

She gave no perceptible sign of interest. She had taken a chair in the full sunlight. Every indifferent glance was sharply lit. Was it possible—was it by some miracle possible that she had not recognised him?

"Isn't it marvellous!" Carfax was rhapsodising. "If you had come into this room, Sylvia, without any talk from me, and seen Mr. Brierly standing there—and if he'd happened to wear a moustache, own up, now, wouldn't you have thought that he was John himself?"

Sylvia laughed, and at the laugh Corbeyne gritted his teeth. In the harsh sound was locked a grief, a

pride, a passionate resentment that flayed his every nerve.

"Oh, dear no!" She had stopped laughing abruptly. "Of course, the resemblance is remarkable—miraculous! In profile it's conceivable I might have been mistaken. But the full-face—in spite of the close resemblance of feature, colour of the eyes, everything—Mr. Brierly is to me not the remotest degree like—my husband.

"But it can't be very pleasant for you to be discussed in this manner, Mr. Brierly. I think we both ought to apologise."

Corbeyne turned to the window and stared at a world gone hard and glittering like her eyes. For a moment he was beyond speech and movement. Behind him Carfax was making vague noises. Ah, they were merging into words. Corbeyne turned slowly back into the room.

"May I suggest, Mr. Brierly, that Mrs. Corbeyne should go into the matter with you now and make further arrangements. You could come and see me later, perhaps? I have a luncheon appointment, but can see you at three o'clock at my office in Fleet Street. Will you be there?"

Alone with her. . . .? No, he couldn't do it. He could not. It was too much.

"Certainly," he found himself saying. "I am entirely at Mrs. Corbeyne's service."

"Ah, good!" said Carfax. "In that case—I think—ah, yes——"

A few more superfluities and he was gone. The door had closed behind him.

Corbeyne looked at her. She had risen. Under his gaze hers never faltered; but, without warning, her upper lip began to tremble.

At sight of it, Corbeyne's self-command deserted him. He had seen that little trembling of the lip so often—it had meant fatigue, unhappiness that he could coax away.

"Sylvia!" he said hoarsely. He took a step towards her.

"No."

The scorn in her voice as she rejected their personal relationships cut like a whip.

The next moment she was at the door; she had opened it, and called:

"Lord Carfax. I'm sorry. If you can spare just a minute, please."

Carfax, who was half-way down the stairs, came hurrying back. She waited for him on the threshold, her eyes studiously upon his advancing form.

"What's the trouble?" he asked anxiously.

This time it was she who closed the door.

"There is a side to this—conspiracy—of ours—an important side we've none of us touched on," she said formally. "I want to make it plain to you and to Mr. Brierly that I am to be treated as his wife only in the presence of a third person other than yourself. That is an absolute condition. If it should ever be broken—and I apologise to Mr. Brierly for the suggestion—I shall immediately betray the whole conspiracy, regardless of the consequences. I am quite firm on that point and quite unscrupulous. My patriotism, I am sorry to say, has limits."

"Of course, my dear, that was—most clearly implied—in the arrangement I made with Mr. Brierly——"

Lord Carfax faltered and turned suspiciously to Corbeyne.

"Ah, yes, no doubt. Perhaps I should not have emphasised it." Sylvia's unconcern was almost perfect. "But since we have all been so business-like, I felt it could do no harm to mention the point in your presence. So sorry to have called you back."

Carfax murmured assurances, still a little puzzled, and took himself off.

Again they faced each other. There was no trembling now of Sylvia's lips. Cold and firm and hard they matched her smile. And suddenly Corbeyne noticed that she was not dressed in black, as Katherine had been, but in gayer colours than he had ever known her wear before.

"Now, Mr.—Brierly," she said.

She spoke briskly. She could be brisk and competent for so long as Lord Carfax's ridiculous blunder were allowed to act as a screen, for the nakedness of her wifehood. She could talk with him, make plans with him. But for her he must be 'Mr. Brierly', a thing born in that room of Lord Carfax's imagination—a puppet without past or future.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RETURN TO THE RUINS

JOHN CORBEYNE very nearly laughed. He had breathed her name and she had sent for Lord Carfax, in order to stipulate in his presence that there should be no familiarities.

"Mr.—Brierly!"

He had tried to reach hands to her across the dividing gulf, and he had merely cut an ill-timed caper, like a jester in a tragedy.

She was saying something a little stilted about her husband, but he was not listening. He was trying to ascertain his position and failing. Was the common belief about woman's instinct a myth? After those six years together in Elysium, could she fail to recognise him just because he had changed a little and Carfax had told her he was someone else? He could not decide. He was too tired to decide. In the last month in which all human values had crashed about him, he had lost too much self-confidence to dogmatise about Sylvia's instinct. One thing only was clear. Whether she recognised him or not, in her presence he must either act the part of 'Mr. Brierly' in Carfax's preposterous play, or abandon this eleventh hour chance to redeem the honour of John Corbeyne.

He began to hear her words and then to understand them.

" . . . although I was only able to follow the broad outline of his plans. All his political work was

done at home, and I have carefully indexed all his notes, so if you are used to financial matters you will have no real difficulty in picking up the threads."

She stopped. Corbeyne realised that he would have to say something.

"Thank you," he managed. "When would it be convenient for me to go through these various documents?"

"You can come back with me to the house now, if you like. I understand that you are seeing Lord Carfax again at three o'clock. That will allow you something over two hours of uninterrupted work."

He had never guessed that Sylvia could act. How perfectly she did it—if she was acting! The very inflection of her voice suggested a woman slowly waking from the lethargy of a personal bereavement to a rather diverting duty. There was about her, too, a new, magnetic forcefulness. Perhaps it had been latent during all those years in Elysium, but he had never guessed it. There was also an unsuspected mental activity. It was as if she had learnt his lines as well as her own and were energising him so that he spoke them easily.

"Then I will come back with you to your house," he heard himself saying quite pleasantly. "I shall rely upon you to protect me from any pitfalls with the servants. I am counting on their making the same mistake as Lord Carfax when he first saw me."

Could she really endure this dreary pantomime!

"The butler's name is Woodhams—the valet's, Garfield," she told him. "Oh, and did Lord Carfax tell you you are supposed to have a son of three?"

Was it a pantomime? No, a thousand times! If Sylvia had decided on pantomime to punish him, she would not have added that cruel jibe. Sylvia might strike to wound, but she would not turn the knife.

"Oh, indeed!" he said with the nervous laugh that

had come to him during the last month. "What is his name?"

"His name is Michael," she answered. "But my husband and I used to call him the Jobber—a rather ridiculous nickname. I don't know how it originated. I'm using his proper name now, but some friend or other might use the nickname, so you had better know it."

Hullo, Sylvia's first lie, ran his thoughts! She knew well enough how "the Jobber" had originated. How very readily the lie had come! Bah! The merest trifle to avoid a tedious explanation. Still, she could have left that bit unsaid—about not knowing how it originated. Yes, a trifle, nothing more! But it gave him an odd shiver of eeriness. Through the eyes of Mr. Brierly he would be compelled to look upon things that had been beyond the imagination of John Corbeyne. . . .

He held the door open and together they left the Cardinal Inn.

CHAPTER XIX

PANTOMIME

IN the last half-hour Corbeyne had learnt the futility of making plans in advance. He made no plans against his return to his house. He sat beside Sylvia in the taxi that was taking him there, listless, ready for anything and ready for nothing. That very elusive fragrance that always clung to her—a fragrance like a memory of old-world gardens—stole out to him and caressed him. It gave him a dream-like sensation. It wove itself into her words while she explained why the fine weather was lasting so long.

“Here we are, Mr. Brierly.”

Home—he had come home again—at last! A wave of emotion shook Corbeyne, such as he had not yet in all his torments undergone. Home—Sylvia’s home and his. . . .

He jerked himself together. She was waiting for him to hand her out. Her hand was on his arm, the merest conventional touch. . . . And he must not let himself look up at the nursery windows. He busied himself in diligent fumbling for money to pay the taxi-man.

“I fear the next few minutes may be a little awkward,” murmured Sylvia as he rejoined her.

Woodhams created the first “awkwardness.” Corbeyne said good morning to Woodhams, and Woodhams said, with a maddening respectfulness:

"Good morning, sir. We all hope that you have quite recovered."

Corbeyne said that he had quite recovered and reflected that Woodhams was exasperatingly perfect. If Woodhams had awaited his opportunity, and said: "Sir, we servants are all aware of what you have been doing, but you can rely on us to pretend to you and to everybody else that you have been ill," he would have shaken hands with Woodhams. But when Woodhams said all that just standing in the hall there, by no other medium than the inflection of his voice and his butler's bow and his impregnable respectfulness—

Sylvia was leading the way into the study. He followed her and looked about him. No silver boxes and no cushions; all leather and dark oak in this home that had been his. But—the place had been cleaned or something. Hardly that! He supposed it had always been clean, but now, somehow, it had become—tidy. His pipes had been moved from the rack. Probably they, too, had been cleaned.

But it was a beautiful room. . . .

Sylvia was going to a drawer in his desk—a liberty she had never taken in Elysium. She was opening a leather-bound book with strangely capable fingers.

"This is the key to the index. The notes and documents are filed in this cabinet. I think it all explains itself, and I would suggest that you go through it and send for me if you get into any difficulties in which you think I could help."

He thanked her, and she explained the working of the house telephone, which would enable him to speak to her or to the servants. Then:

"I think that is all I can do to help you at the moment, Mr. Brierly."

He raised his head and looked at her steadily. Up to now he had not dared to gaze his fill. He had snatched glances at her, glances dimmed by the madness of the whole mad situation—by her glittering

composure—by his own deadly fatigue. Now, abruptly, his brain cleared and he could rest his eyes on her once more.

Tall she was; he had forgotten how tall and straight. He liked immensely the walking-dress she wore; though the blue of it was rather insistent. She used to prefer a softer shade. And hadn't she done her hair differently? He wouldn't be able to tell until he saw her without her hat—there was something almost puritanical about that hat. Or did all women, like Sylvia, wear small, tilted hats and all the Katherines large, dark, floppy things that kept the light from their faces. Sylvia was being reckless about light. It blazed on her now, showing him that the laughter had gone from her eyes and lips and left only a regal perfection of colour and line, of blue and crimson. Blue and crimson. . . . and her hair was still pure gold and her throat alabaster . . . but the dancing play of life and light, exquisite to see—*that* had been driven out, that had gone, utterly.

"That is all, Mr. Brierly."

No faltering, no faintest pity for him, for either of them. He could not speak. He bowed and she left him.

As the door closed behind her, John Corbeyne laughed. He listened to the laugh as it vibrated faintly between the copper overwork of the fireplace and the opposite wall. It seemed to him a quite healthy and vigorous laugh, as indeed it should be. Years ago the fates had wrecked his private life and the work had still gone on. His private life had now been wrecked a second time through the same instrument, and again the work must go on.

He picked up Sylvia's index, studied it, then opened the cabinet. She had used one of his own systems of filing and used it rather well. Five minutes later he was deep in the process of picking up the threads.

He began to mutter, at first self-consciously, then in complete absorption. Mutterings of self-criticism, as

he realised that his notes were already a month old. Mutterings of satisfaction as he revised and adapted. ". . . bring those provincial banks into line with a small guarantee. . . . H'm! That'll make Washington sit up and take notice. . . . Ha, ha, make Carfax sit up, too! Figurehead, indeed! . . . Now for poor old Gorlay's little trouble. . . . Get it all pat for the Premier."

An hour must have passed when Woodhams appeared carrying a tray.

"What's all this, Woodhams?" he demanded, irritated at the interruption and wholly absorbed.

"Mrs. Corbeyne said you would prefer not to be disturbed for lunch, sir, and that I was to bring it to you in the study."

"Oh, right ho! I can't have it on here, though. Put it down somewhere over there."

He was back in his figures, and Woodhams had left the room before the interruption really broke his train of thought. Then he sat up with a start.

He had revised his figures—nothing else. He could not revise the other things that were a month old. In a month, Lord Henry Graunham had died in prison, and Katherine—and Katherine—

He was old again when he stood up, old enough to know that he was hungry, and that there was a very nice smell in the room. Chicken, he thought!

On the tray was a bulky envelope, which he opened. Inside was a wad of bank and currency notes.

"Dear Mr. Brierly," he read, "*I enclose the sum of two hundred pounds in notes for preliminary expenses. Please ignore the money question in making your arrangements. Your personal salary, the amount of which was agreed between you and Lord Carfax, will be placed upon the desk in notes each week.*

"*I enclose also a latchkey with the request that you will consider yourself at liberty to enter the house at any hour*

of the day or night and proceed to the study, which is wholly at your disposal as your private room. If you should wish to consult me at any time in connection with our business, please ring on the house telephone. When I am out of the house I will always leave particulars of my whereabouts with the servants. Yours faithfully, Sylvia Corbeyne. P.S.—I would suggest the advisability of immediately destroying this note."

Corbeyne destroyed the note. He gazed gingerly at the money she had sent him, then thrust it into his pocket.

"I must remember to keep account of my expenses," he told himself as he removed the cover and sat down to lunch.

CHAPTER XX

THE PRIME MINISTER

THE heavy melancholy was slipping from Corbeyne as he made his way to Lord Carfax's office in Fleet Street. *The work must go on.*

If he did not wish to leave his mark on contemporary history as an incompetent sluggard, he must cut out all the ironical reflections and concentrate on the work in hand.

Lord Carfax had already concentrated on the work in hand to such an extent that Corbeyne found the interview almost disappointing. Lord Carfax's temperament was not of the kind that keeps stopping and asking itself where it is going—it was of the kind that takes rapid and possibly careless aim and then bends itself to the attainment of the object. Lord Carfax had already bent to the task of palming Mr. Brierly upon the Cabinet and the world in general as John Corbeyne. He had become vastly good-tempered about it, in spite of his anxiety for Gorlay's, and greeted his caller as a friend.

"Seen the evening papers?" he asked as he offered a cigar.

"No," answered Corbeyne. "I've been at—Corbeyne House—studying his notes."

"Corbeyne House!" exploded Carfax. "How did the butler——"

"Greeted me respectfully and hoped I had quite recovered."

"Ah, you couldn't have a more severe test. Gad, what an amazing piece of luck—the exact double! I've always said that if you take a bold line luck runs after you."

"What about the evening papers?" Corbeyne reminded him.

"Well, you'll find as soon as you've time for the papers that you have pluckily cut short your convalescence and returned to Town. I've not been sitting still. It's all fixed. You'll be elected on Thursday week. That's a mere formality. How did you get on with the notes? Think you can bluff the Old Man about Gorlay's? I've told him about—er—Corbeyne's recovery on the 'phone, and he's quite keen to see you."

"There's no difficulty there," answered Corbeyne. "I have the hang of all Corbeyne's main proposals. He—seems to have had Gorlay's well in mind. I don't say I could stand cross-examination from an expert without notes, but I don't suppose Corbeyne himself could. I'm quite ready to meet the Prime Minister."

"Don't want to rush it!" said Carfax, forgetting that he had spent his own life rushing everything he touched. "We've got an hour or two yet while I put you through your paces."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind," said Corbeyne. "I've got the hang of the Gorlay business quite. It's as simple as anything. They're perfectly solvent. I'll only have to act Corbeyne convincingly, and it's done."

This was a trifle too fast even for Lord Carfax.

"What about the signature?" he demanded.

"I'll be able to forge it completely in a couple of days. There'll be no need to sign anything to-night."

"H'm! You've got about four times as much assurance as the real Corbeyne," remarked Carfax, and studied him in silence as Corbeyne added:

"I'm going to get chambers this afternoon. I'll be back here in good time."

Lord Carfax nodded but said nothing. Corbeyne knew that he had something awkward to say and was groping for words. It was an old trick of Carfax's. He would sit nodding his head, his brows half knit.

The head stopped wagging.

"Just one word, my dear fellow. This little stunt of ours will take every ounce of energy the three of us can give it to make it go. Got me? The rottenest trick any of us could play on the others would be to risk mugging the whole thing through a false sense of delicacy. See what I'm working to?" he added with a grin.

"Go ahead," said Corbeyne. "I'm not sensitive."

"Stout fellow!" ejaculated Carfax. "Well, look here, you're the living image of Corbeyne—more like him than a twin brother—and yet, you know, you're not so very like him after all, if you understand me. For instance, there's the way you hold your head. You keep it rather forward and a bit down. Corbeyne was always jerking it back—sort of punctuated his words with his chin—like that. See?"

"Yes, I'll practise it," said Corbeyne quietly.

"It's things like that count more than any difference there may be in the face," explained Carfax. "The first time I saw you I thought you were Corbeyne. When I faced you the second time I knew you weren't. All these little etceteras I'm talking about! The moustache don't matter so much. You've shaved it. That's all. But—look here, you can punch my head for this when our little stunt's over—but—at a shrewd guess you haven't been on a lemonade diet for the last year or so. Now, Corbeyne was practically a tee-totaller. . . . Think you could manage that, too?"

"Yes," said Corbeyne, and added with grim satisfaction: "If a job like this is worth doing at all it's worth making sacrifices for."

"My sentiments to a T, absolutely to a T!" said Carfax profoundly. "Now, dress—dress is about right—same style—same stuff. But—er—Corbeyne, of course, was a wealthy man and always had a valet at his elbow with a clothes brush."

"I'll engage a valet this afternoon," said Corbeyne. "Or, no, Garfield can—er—er—that is his name, isn't it?—Corbeyne's present valet can come to my chambers and look after me there."

Carfax nodded.

"Of course you look a good deal older than Corbeyne, but I'll manage that. Corbeyne's supposed to have had an operation, you know. Oh, and one other thing—I told you that Corbeyne had made all his property over to his wife. Peculiar behaviour in the circumstances—very peculiar! Still, he did it. Very lucky for us he did. I'm going to feature it. See? 'Mr. John Corbeyne'—that's you—'retires from control of his own affairs in order to devote himself wholeheartedly to the service of the nation.' It's just the kind of thing they'd expect of him—you. It'll go down well, and it'll prevent private financiers from offering you individual deals."

Corbeyne rose. Carfax armed him to the door.

"And remember, if you make a bloomer through not recognising somebody you ought to, swear that your memory has not been the same since your operation. I'll get an amusing anecdote ready for you by five o'clock—some flapdoodle about offering to write a man an introduction to himself. Oh, one minute before you go, here are some cards of his! You'll find them an Open Sesame pretty nearly everywhere."

It was this last absurdity that nearly broke Corbeyne's composure. To go forth as the shadow of himself, smoothing out his difficulties by the use of his own name—it was as if his own clothes had become the motley of a buffoon.

In Fleet Street he had the impulse to turn back into Carfax's office and say: "Look here, Jim, you're entitled to believe I'm a cad and I'm quite sure you're an idiot. Let's start working sanely together and drop this mockery."

No. No, there was Sylvia. She had stated her terms. Whether she were fooling him or not he must abide by them—or lose his chance of redeeming himself in his own eyes. "*John Corbeyne is a dirty traitor.*" He clenched his teeth.

The visiting card proved its worth at the estate agent's office. Corbeyne was shown into the private office where the head of the firm expressed gratification and made noises of surprise at his caller's rapid recovery. Corbeyne was more than a little puzzled at the widespread interest in his personal life. In the later days of his fame he had had but little contact with the outside world—Sylvia had protected him from all that.

The estate agent quite grasped the position. Mr. John Corbeyne wanted chambers and wanted them at once. A man in Corbeyne's position can afford to have chambers at once. Within the hour Corbeyne had engaged a suite in Victoria Street within half a mile of the House of Commons, having committed Sylvia to the payment of a daring premium. The chambers were furnished and would be ready for his occupation on the following day.

On his return to the office in Fleet Street, Corbeyne was interested in the novel sight of Carfax wallowing in a state of almost abject fear.

"Gorlay will be here in a minute," he almost whispered as Corbeyne closed the door. "Remember you're supposed to know him—not too well—you've had one or two deals together."

"I gathered that," said Corbeyne profoundly.

"As to the Gorlay patter for the Old Man—you'd better leave it to Gorlay himself to do the talking. Just confirm all he says. I don't know what you've made

of Corbeyne's notes on the subject, but the gist of the matter is that Gorlay's is solvent and can give security for every penny wanted, only the other banks won't touch his paper as it would suit them better in the long run to make him pay for refusing to amalgamate."

"Yes, I've got all that," said Corbeyne absently. He had foreseen the danger of a complication. Carfax was running the figure-head business to death. The man was a fool outside advertisement. As if the Prime Minister would take action just because John Corbeyne smiled and looked pleasant! The Prime Minister would be sure to question him minutely. There would probably be experts present at the interview.

Carfax would be bound to drop his theory of a physical double of John Corbeyne when he heard that double tackling the banking experts!

"And remember if you get hung up—feel faint or have a coughing fit, and I'll jump in and splash about," Carfax was saying when Gorlay's presence was announced.

When Gorlay came in he immediately shook hands with Corbeyne. There was that in his face which touched John Corbeyne to a forgetfulness of his own tragedy.

"Corbeyne, I'll never forget this—whether you accomplish anything or not," he said with quiet impressiveness. "You're risking your life to save my bank. You're ill—I can see it. You're a shadow of your former self—I would hardly have recognised you if I'd seen you in the street."

Lord Carfax jumped up and sat down again.

"My *dear* Gorlay," said Corbeyne deprecatingly. "It's not a personal matter. It would be a national disaster if you had to close down. That's my case for the Premier."

"We shall close down—about midday to-morrow unless we find backing," said Gorlay. "We paid out yesterday at the usual rate—it was no use closing doors.

To-day I gave orders for a maximum of delay in making cash payments."

"I was astounded," said Corbeyne. "What started the run?"

"I don't know," answered Gorlay, lowering his voice. "But I think—it was the Deagle crowd."

"I often told you Deagle was a crook, Corbeyne," put in Lord Carfax, "and you always laughed at me."

That was an odd piece of humbug, thought Corbeyne. Carfax often *had* told him that, and he had always laughed. Then he realised that Carfax was only giving "Brierly" a pointer.

"I don't know much about Deagle," said Corbeyne. "We must look into it later." His mind had gone back to the danger of Carfax's presence in the coming interview. He was nerving himself to a daring risk.

"Come on," he said shortly.

The Prime Minister received Carfax and Corbeyne privately, and made gracious inquiries regarding the latter's health, expressing himself highly gratified that the prospective Minister was ready to return to work.

"Well, we mustn't keep Mr. Gorlay and the others waiting any longer," said the Premier, and made for the door, Corbeyne and Carfax following.

"One moment, sir, if I may," said Corbeyne. "I intend to ask Mr. Gorlay to make a very full statement of his affairs, and in the circumstances I feel sure that for Mr. Gorlay's sake, Lord Carfax would rather not be present, if you would be good enough to excuse him——"

"Quite so, quite so," said the Premier. "Carfax, we'll count you out of this, old man. Don't forget to see me next Thursday. Come along, Corbeyne."

From the corner of his eye Corbeyne caught a glimpse of Carfax. He felt very sorry, but there had been no alternative.

For half an hour the discussion raged between Gorlay and three representatives of the great banking trusts.

Corbeyne conducted the discussion with an impartiality at which the Premier nodded approvingly, saying next to nothing. Then the Premier dismissed Gorlay and asked the three representatives to wait while he conferred with Corbeyne.

"I didn't follow all Gorlay's figures—that was your job," said the Premier, when they were alone. "Are they all right?"

"Absolutely," said Corbeyne. "I've had a good deal to do with Gorlay's, and I'm pretty confident that the run was engineered. You see, Deagle and these other wool people——"

"I don't want the details," snapped the Premier. "Give me the conclusion, and for Heaven's sake give me the right one."

"The run was unnecessary. If we don't save Gorlay's—well, the collapse of a famous old-established bank at this stage is bound to cause a financial panic. The result will be most embarrassing to our forward programme. To save them will cost nobody anything. Gorlay's private fortune will carry the losses made so far."

"That's what I wanted," said the Premier. "Right! You'd better go home now or you'll have a relapse."

"Don't you want me to talk to the Trust, sir?"

The Premier smiled.

"No, thanks," he said. "You'd use me to put pressure on them and I don't allow that. It's undemocratic. Besides, we've finished with finance for to-day." Corbeyne gasped. "We're just going to chat over other matters until somebody volunteers to see Gorlay's through the run."

The Premier chuckled.

"When you're one of us," he said, "don't ever try to put pressure on anybody. Always talk about *something else* until someone volunteers to do what you want. There is always a 'something else.' And when you

know more 'something elses' than anyone you'll get my job—if you're fool enough to want it."

Pondering on this little object lesson in diplomacy, Corbeyne left the Premier, and returned to Ealing to explain things to Katherine.

CHAPTER XXI

"YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE"

KATHERINE was lying on the couch in their sitting-room, with all the black and gold cushions round her. The room was oppressive with scent and staleness and an undercurrent of something which Corbeyne analysed as the smoke of heavy Russian cigarettes.

"Have you come back to me, John?" she whispered.

Corbeyne's mind, still idly busy with the unmistakable odour of Russian cigarettes, focussed itself painfully upon her. She was supine, eyes closed, full lips parted, hand trailing to the floor.

"Are you ill?" Corbeyne inquired.

Katherine's answering murmur gave him to understand that she could not tell him how ill she was. For hours she had been waiting for him, and not a soul had been near her all day.

Corbeyne's subconsciousness commented again on the Russian cigarette smoke. Someone *had* been near her, for Katherine rarely smoked, and never when alone. Not that it mattered. The one important thing now was to tell her what had occurred. From his experience of her, Corbeyne judged that she would not believe the simple truth—that he was being paid to impersonate himself. She would grope behind his words. He thought for a moment; he must make use of the margin of falsehood which she would in any case suspect.

"I'm sorry I went off so unceremoniously this morning," he began. "I saw in the paper that there is a run on the bank of a man I know. It upset me rather, because I was in a way—associated with him, and I see now I let him down when I wound up all my affairs and disappeared without a word."

He paused and let his deliberately halting sentences sink in. Katherine's eyes were on him now. She had raised herself slightly, and his subconsciousness, still aware of the cigarette smoke, noted also that she had been crying.

"You mean you left things so that you and this man in the bank may get into trouble about money?" she queried. "Has someone found out?"

She had jumped to exactly the kind of conclusion that would make explanations easy.

"Hardly that," he returned. "The 'trouble' isn't so much money. It's more that I seem to have muddled things rather. I thought that by clearing out I could drop everything all at once, and others could straighten things out. But this man I've been seeing to-day says they can't. He says there'll be a number of difficulties, not only in his bank, but in every department of my old work unless I put things right. Not that there's any danger, exactly."

Katherine was by no means reassured; Corbeyne had not meant her to be.

"You can't be sure there isn't. You oughtn't to take risks, John, not even for my sake." Corbeyne stood this without blinking. "Can't you go up to Town again to-morrow? I could say you'd got a friend you were showing London to."

"I think I'd better go up every day until things are in order," said Corbeyne craftily, and loathed her for his subterfuges. "It may take some time, but as you say, I mustn't take risks. You understand that I shall have to be John Corbeyne while I'm in the City, though, don't you? I can't help that."

"As long as you don't meet Mr. Pelt, I suppose it's all right," she said doubtfully. "Though if you did I daresay he wouldn't know you were Mr. Brierly, too. Mrs. Pelt's told me twice how dear Robert's always saying Mr. Brierly's the image of John Corbeyne. Makes me think I'll burst out laughing sometimes! Funny Mr. Pelt should know anything about John Corbeyne, isn't it?—it isn't as though you'd been well-known really, like a royalty."

"In the City men get to know each other by sight," Corbeyne evaded. "I'm not at all likely to meet Pelt. That's settled, then; I'll spend the next few days in Town. Er—about money, Katherine."

"Oh, I've been so worried," wailed Katherine, as he had guessed she would. "You said I shouldn't go short here, but really I've had to pinch right and left, and now——"

"I've been offered a job," he cut in.

She stopped, her mouth open. She looked very unattractive with her mouth open.

"It's a political job," he went on before she could speak. "I've been asked to become Minister of Credit. It won't interfere with my clearing up my own business affairs; that's one of the advantages of it."

She was startled, even impressed, but he could feel her mind working round and round his statement.

"A Minister! That's a very important job, isn't it? However did they pick on you? It seems so *strange*."

"They don't always choose men already known to the public. In this case, they think I can do the work they want done, and that's all there is to it. I am to have fifty pounds a week. Here are thirty for you, Katherine. I've been living on you these last weeks, I'm afraid."

He counted out the notes, smiling grimly as he remembered that the money had been advanced for expenses. Katherine was undoubtedly an expense. She was the most expensive thing in the world.

She took the notes with the same startled hesitation that showed in her eyes. She stuffed them under a cushion without counting them; she was never unduly interested in money. Somewhat ungenerously Corbeyne wondered why mere money greed had been left out of her nature.

"I think you might have talked it over with me before you accepted," she remarked querulously.

"For one thing, I had no opportunity. I had to give my answer at once," Corbeyne pointed out. "For another, you said when we met at the Parnassus that I could be anything I liked in the City so long as I was 'Mr. Brierly' here. Well, I shall not fail you socially. You can tell your friends anything you like about my work; I will bear you out."

She shrugged her shoulders and began to rise.

"Oh, well, so long as you don't run into Mr. Pelt! He's the only one who has ever seen John Corbeyne. And it certainly will be nice to have so much money. We'll get a place of our own——" her eyes wandered ruminatively over the scattered silver boxes. Then she came back to immediate necessities. "There's nothing for dinner, John, and it's Mabel's evening out. I'll just go over to Mr. Capton's and settle up with him and get something tasty. He's been rather off-hand lately—if I pay his bill it'll show him his place."

"Let me take you out to dinner somewhere," Corbeyne suggested. "You can pay Capton to-morrow."

Katherine was unexpectedly obstinate.

"No, I'll run across now. I don't like keeping tradespeople waiting for their bills. It isn't right."

Corbeyne smothered a grin at this sudden scruple.

"I'll wait outside while you go in, then."

Again Katherine objected.

"No, you stay here. I've got to come back anyway. To—to change, if you're going to take me out. I shan't be long, it's almost opposite, you know, and then we'll have a cosy dinner together."

She flung him an arch glance and left him. Corbeyne, frowning, began to pace the room. This sudden determination to go, alone, to a shop just across the way. He heard the front door close. Deliberately he went to the window.

From behind the lace curtain he watched her hurrying off with that quaint, fluttering walk that so many men found attractive. That, presumably, was Mr. Capton's—grocer plus post-office plus——

"You may telephone from here."

He could just read the legend in the growing shadows.

It was an impulse from the subconsciousness that drove him out of the house after her—the same subconsciousness that had noted the cigarette smoke that could only have proceeded from Russian cigarettes, the tear-stains, the simulation of scrupulous attention to household finance. Prying? Well, why not. Was it any worse than letting your wife think you'd eloped with a houri? Was the first crying need for the protection of Sylvia and the Jobber any less insistent at this moment with its demand that he should lie to the world and to them and cheat them for their own sake?

He passed on the opposite side of the road and glanced at the shop. She was at the cash-desk. Had he wronged her? As he looked someone stepped out of the telephone-box. He waited. When he passed the shop again she was in the telephone-box. He waited longer and stood in another shop doorway when she came out. Then he slipped into the telephone-box.

The ear-piece was still warm.

"Exchange? You've just put through a call from this box. I want to know what the number was, please."

"I'll put you through to the Supervisor."

Corbeyne repeated his tale, asking to be told the number.

“Who are you?” came the inevitable question.

“I am a Government Official,” said Corbeyne with partial truth. “You don’t know me—my name is Brierly and Lord Carfax will vouch for me. It will suit my purpose if you will just make a note of the number yourself now and I will obtain proper authority to get the information from you to-morrow.”

His voice carried more authority than he knew.

“There’s nothing private about a telephone call,” came the competent voice of the Supervisor. “We have to satisfy ourselves as to the genuineness of the inquiry. The number was Chancery 7124.”

“Thank you, very much,” said Corbeyne. “Can you give me the address?”

“No, you will have to apply for that,” was the answer.

He did not immediately return to the house but took a short walk. His thoughts were very busy.

Katherine had gone out to telephone to someone. She had taken precautions to go alone. Corbeyne’s speculations merged into memories. Furtive telephone calls had been frequent before the separation; they had indicated then the existence of some male willing to sympathise and console where a self-centred husband could only domineer. Corbeyne had ignored it all, waiting to show his disgust until he could show it in one sweeping blow.

He walked more quickly. Once more there was secrecy—lying and contriving—between her and someone. Once more he must wait. A telephone message in itself was insignificant; but if she were playing with him, if, all the time she fettered him and dragged him down to death, she were conducting an intrigue elsewhere—ah, then again he would strike and this time there should be no mistake. This time he would see to it that he became irrefragably free.

He let himself into the maisonnette and found Katherine hovering in the hall.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said easily. "I had to get some tobacco. I didn't realise you would change so quickly."

"I thought I'd keep this on after all," she was forced to explain, aware of his glance at her black lace house frock. "I couldn't think where you'd got to."

Corbeyne looked at her narrowly. She avoided his eye, yet he caught the impression that her mysterious communication had not been of a flirtatious nature.

"If you're ready, let's go and get some dinner," he suggested. "It's getting late and I'm rather fagged. I didn't sleep at all last night."

They made their way in silence to the restaurant where they had dined on the night of his arrival. The silence remained unbroken throughout the main courses save for Corbeyne's platitudes. It was not until the waiter brought coffee that Katherine suddenly roused herself from her unusual abstraction.

"I've been thinking about your being a Minister of Credit, John, and it seems to me it will be a very different thing to being at an ordinary office. You say you need only take care not to meet Mr. Pelt, but your photo may be in the papers, in fact it's sure to be and people here will recognise you."

There was an edge to her voice that emphasised her words. Corbeyne straightened himself.

"They'll see a likeness between Mr. Brierly and John Corbeyne, possibly," he admitted, "and no doubt Pelt will remind them that he always said there was one. But then, so many men have a double. It'll give them all something to talk about."

The mild sarcasm fell unheeded. Katherine ploughed on.

"Well, people here may think the likeness is just an accident, but they won't go on thinking it's an accident when you're never here in Ealing while John Corbeyne is doing things in Town like—like being in your place in the House to answer questions, and in

these days the House sometimes sits day and night." Katherine paused for breath. "And then you'll have to have audiences with the Prime Minister and work till all hours at your office and—and attend State functions——"

Corbeyne stared. She was quoting someone, quoting word for word, like the transparent fool she was!

"In fact, John, you'll be away from me so much people here will wonder, and the moment they wonder they're liable to get hold of the truth, and the moment they trouble to compare John Corbeyne's movements with Mr. Brierly's it's all quite clear. In fact, I think you're breaking our compact in taking that work, and I—I protest."

Corbeyne bent his eyes to his plate, that she might not read the suspicion in them. Quoting! Whom was she quoting? The figures danced across the white, glazed surface under his gaze—Chancery 7124.

"Of course, to have fifty pounds a week would be lovely if you could get it without upsetting our arrangements, but you can't; and anyway no one here has so much, and it's no good being more than just a little better off than they are, because they simply count you out if you're really rich; so if you try some ordinary work and get five or six pounds a week we can be very comfortable and go on as we are in *every way*."

Corbeyne chased the imaginary figures across his plate with his forefinger. Chancery 7124 had coached her well; had given her even the words with which to veil her ultimatum! He looked up again. She was flushed, hard as to eyes and lips, her hands at nervous play with bag and gloves.

"You consider then that if I were to refuse to give up this work that—that I have already undertaken, you, on your side, would feel justified in doing what you threatened to do at first—give evidence against that man Shrager for perjury, and thus re-open the case?"

The restlessness of her hands grew. In her eyes hardness deepened to a cruel satisfaction.

"I should be forced to do it, John. After all, I've got myself to consider, haven't I? I told you from the first exactly what I should ask of you, it isn't as though you didn't know my point of view, I'm sure I always made it quite clear."

Oh yes, she had made it clear enough, a month ago, thought Corbeyne; but the time between had blurred her arguments a little, so that this evening she had been willing enough to acquiesce when first he had broached the change. Then someone—Chancery 7124—had cleared her mind, had sharpened the issue and reminded her of the deadliness of her weapon.

He studied her quietly. He was going to surprise her. He was going to sweep the triumph out of her eyes. He wondered whether she would make a scene. There were no diners within earshot, but a waiter was making out a bill at a side-table a few feet away. . .

"Very well, Katherine. I think you'll regret it, but—reopen the case. I cannot give up my work as Minister of Credit."

At her exclamation the waiter turned, peering at them. One or two people looked up. Corbeyne rose.

"Let us finish our discussion somewhere else," he said. "We're attracting attention here."

In silence they reached the door of the maisonnette. He unlocked it and stood aside for her to go up the stairs. They gained the drawing-room. The merciless electric light showed them the black and gold cushions, the monotony of cheap yellow wood, the littered silver boxes, already tarnished. Corbeyne looked his farewell at it, and then stepped back to the door.

"I'm pretty well played out, Katherine. I'll go to bed, I think. I shall probably be gone by the time you come down to-morrow so——"

Katherine brushed aside his fatigue.

"I must know where I am, John."

"But it is all settled," returned Corbeyne impatiently. "You've stated your terms; I've told you I can't comply with them. You are now going to make good your threat of destruction. Agreed. I will leave you the address of my chambers in Town, and—we need not meet again."

She made no reply. Corbeyne moved again to the door.

"John——"

He waited, biting back his irritation. He feared her most when she was apparently aimless. He watched her over-manicured fingers toying with the rubbish on the mantelshef. Oh, Lord, to be rid of her, to be rid of everything except the work, even though it brought the deluge!

"John, do you hate me?"

"We—have nothing in common, Katherine."

She kept her gaze on her aimless fingers.

"That doesn't really matter. You can—love people you've nothing in common with. We'd nothing in common when we married, but you didn't hate me then. If you'd had your work you wouldn't have cared, this last month, that we've what you call nothing in common, you'd have liked me for myself. You'd have ——"

Corbeyne struggled with the impulse to voice his creed of detestation. He reduced it to a shrug.

"Speculations are rather superfluous, aren't they? I should be glad if you'd excuse me. Unless you have some new bargain to make."

He had added it in idle contempt, his hand on the door.

"Yes, I have," she said.

Corbeyne's hand fell from the door. He drove out his weariness by main force. She had another compact to propose. Her own? Or one that had been put into her mouth?

"Well?"

She left the mantelshelf and faced him. He saw that her eyes were dilated with excitement.

"John, I don't care if they think I'm a Cabinet Minister's mistress if the Cabinet Minister is you, and if I—I *am*—what I mean is if you—we——"

His non-comprehension held. What on earth——? She had come close to him and laid a hand upon his shoulder. It crept up and round his neck . . . she was closer still. . . . Then suddenly he understood.

"I see," he said. He could not keep his scorn of her from his look, but equally he could not rebuff her caress; it would be like dealing her a physical blow. He stood awkwardly, with every fibre shrinking away from her touch.

"You must understand," he said steadily, "that in order to take up work as Minister of Credit I have had to pretend that I am free from any kind of domestic entanglement. I saw Sylvia to-day; I shall be seen in public with her occasionally in the future."

The arm coiled away from him like the thong of a whip.

"You *are* going back to her! Why can't you be honest with me?"

"I have been honest with you. I have told you that taking up my former work does not mean that anything else in my former life is to be—resurrected. The personal relationship between Sylvia and myself is over. Whatever fresh terms you and I make now—whatever penalty you inflict on me if I find I cannot accept them—Sylvia has finished with me. Does that satisfy you?"

"You mean that you're free to do as you like."

It was so unutterably far from what Corbeyne meant that he laughed. It was a laugh that would have made most women writhe, but it brought Katherine sidling up to him again.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're not cross with me! Come and sit down, John. . . . You see, what I thought

was we can leave here really, we've finished with this place now that you've been seen about with me and so on, and they're all of them looking pretty foolish at having treated me like they once did. Well, I'm willing to live in Town for a bit now, some place that's easier for you to get at than here and if people find out and think badly of me, well, it's terribly hard on me to be unjustly suspected when all the time I've every right to be with you, but I'm willing to put up with it so long as you come and see me whenever you can and—and everything is cosy and nice like it was when we were first married.”

She was lounging on the divan at his side, her head a few inches from his shoulder, her eyes looking languorously into his. Corbeyne contemplated her silently.

Of one thing only he was confident—this new barter was being launched on her own initiative; the note of obedience, as of a child repeating a message, had gone from her voice. Uninstructed, she was making another bid for what she wanted.

And she wanted him, John Corbeyne, the man she had married.

She had wanted him all along. That desire to be “put right” with a parcel of insignificant fools had been quite genuine, no doubt, but it had been backed always by something else. The something else which she had flung at him in the Parnassus on the day she had shot her bolt. He had thrust that personal demand aside then; during the weeks he had spent with her he had acknowledged only her social rights. Now——

Now she was insistent, and circumstances had him by the throat. . . .

“How you do stare, John, and I'm such a fright to-day with being so worried about your being away. Do you think I've changed much since we first met, John? What times we used to have, didn't we, although we were so poor——”

Did she genuinely persuade herself, cut in Corbeyne's ironic memory, that she had been happily married to him? He could not tell.

" . . . but everything'll be much easier now on fifty pounds a week, and I'll find a little flat somewhere and make it ever so nice, and you'll come there and there'll be no need for us to quarrel over dull things like law cases. And if by any chance people do find out about us, well, as you say, it'll take a bit of time for it to get so bad that you have to give up your work, and by then you'll have finished it and you and I can leave London again and go somewhere else. We might go to Darchester, where they were so stand-offish with me when I took a little house there. . . ."

Corbeyne was staring at the floor. His brain was trying to grip the thing. It was difficult simply because it was so monstrously simple. She wanted him back as her lover, no matter what the social consequences to him or herself. If he refused she would unsheath her weapons in a court of law; if he consented all he need fear was the possible discovery of his relationship with "Mrs. Brierly," and with reasonable care the discovery might never be made. . . .

But supposing Katherine did not take reasonable care? Supposing, on the contrary, she duly reported the course of events to Chancery 7124? It was difficult to see what axe of her own she could grind by a deliberate betrayal. Perhaps she was grinding no axe at all but just behaving in a futile, silly, frightened way. That was the real danger of her. The traditional vampire with the perpetual premise of money would have been so much more easily handled.

She was chattering on. About flats and servants and "old times." Beneath the babble he caught a hint of nervousness, of suspense as to whether he would bargain once again with her. . . .

After all, he had no choice, no say in anything beyond a brief yes or no to her bargain.

"It's all settled then, John, isn't it?"

It was her way of requesting his decision. She knew quite well that they had not reached a settlement. It was her way—her maddening, maddening way——

He stood up abruptly, his back towards her. An odd impulse seized him to turn and look at her again, look her up and down, look into her feeble, foolish mind and her shrivelled soul and laugh long and loud at himself and her and the work that *must* go on. Suddenly he knew that he was intensely afraid. He was afraid of looking at her throat, of seeing his hands grip it, grip and grip, choking back her whimpers. . . .

He began to shake all over. Through a thick darkness he felt his way across the room, touched and held the handle of the door. It would be so easy to kill, and then he, too, could die. The door rattled; he must be opening it. A fool to open a door and go away when he could deal death. . . .

A knife-sharp voice in his brain said: "*John Corbeyne is a dirty traitor.*"

"John——"

"Very well. I agree. I agree, Katherine."

"John, you're so *stiff*, you make me laugh. When you always used to say 'Kathie,' don't you remember?—and you'll say 'Kathie' again, won't you? Once we're in our little new nest——"

The door shut her voice out of his ears. He stumbled up the stairs to his room and flung himself on his bed, and immediately he was asleep, as those sleep who have nothing left, not even despair.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DEPUTY HUSBAND

JOHAN CORBEYNE slipped out of the maisonnette while Katherine was still in bed. There was no reason why he should not have called to her through her closed door that he was going, but the maisonnette had developed habits of furtiveness that clung.

He travelled on to Charing Cross and thence to the offices of the Detective Agency which he had employed twelve years ago. The outer office brought back grim memories of the day when his solicitor had first taken him there.

Rason, the proprietor, a one-time member of the C.I.D., seemed to be not a day older. There was the same urbane alertness—the same suggestion that he was fitted for better things than procuring evidence for divorce cases, as indeed he was.

"I don't know whether you remember me," said Corbeyne, "and in any case it is immaterial. Some twelve years ago you assisted me in my divorce. You employed for the purpose a man named Shrager, whom I met in this office. Is he still with you?"

"No, sir," replied the detective. "He left us some three years ago and I've lost touch with him. Do you want him?"

"I do," replied Corbeyne. "He—has cropped up in another case in which I am interested. Will you find him for me?"

That was simple enough. Finding people was an everyday task for the detective. Rason showed him a photograph of Shrager, which Corbeyne dimly recognised. In ten minutes his business was concluded.

He had shrunk from mentioning either Katherine or her mysterious ally to the detective. Later on, perhaps when he had discovered the identity of Chancery 7124. In any case, none of his enemies could move a step without Shrager. Shrager was the match to the powder.

It was ten o'clock when Corbeyne arrived at his chambers. A number of duties claimed his immediate attention. He had promised Carfax he would send for Garfield, his valet. He rang up Corbeyne House and told the man to join him at once. There would be need of a secretary, too. Perhaps he had better consult Carfax about that.

Lord Carfax found that the subject lent itself to explanation and became voluble. The wire tingled with his volubility.

"Secretary? Yes," he said. "Now mind you, there are secretaries and secretaries as far as you're concerned. You'll have a Parliamentary secretary, of course—an M.P., you know, who'll mug up all your affairs and answer questions for you when you're not in the House. But at present you only want a secretary to write your letters and so forth. I'll send you a good girl in the course of the morning.

"By the way, you see what's happened to Gorlay's? The other banks are carrying him through. Splendid work! Splendid ad. for Gorlay's—to come out of a run smiling! Bluster!"

Corbeyne thanked him for the information and rang off.

So Gorlay's was saved. That was that! "And now," he told himself, "We come to Chancery 7124."

Some six months previously when he had been summoned to a private meeting of the Cabinet to give

expert advice he had met the Postmaster-General. He knew that the latter would still have his name in mind in view of his coming entry into the Government.

After a short delay he was speaking to the Postmaster-General himself. He reminded him of the interview and then made his request.

"I'm already being pestered by some fanatic or another," he said, discovering how easy it was to lie if one lies unblushingly. "He rings up every half-hour or so to know what I'm going to do about Russia. I've got his number. Can you give me an authority to get the name and address from the telephone people? . . . Thanks very much. I'll send round right away . . . good-bye."

He telephoned for a messenger and sent him to the Postmaster-General. Before the boy returned Garfield appeared.

"Good-morning, Garfield."

"Good-morning, sir. I hope you're quite yourself again, sir."

"Quite. Er—I shall be staying here for a bit, Garfield. See if the next room is fitted up as a bedroom."

"No, sir. Smaller office, sir. But——"

"Fit it up, then. Buy what's necessary. All my belongings are in this Gladstone: I need a lot more. I believe. Buy them, too. Everything of mine at Corbeyne House is to be left there. Got that?"

"Certainly, sir. Someone at the door, sir."

Garfield removed himself and in his stead there appeared the secretary Carfax had chosen.

She was a pleasant, efficient-looking young woman: that was his first impression of her. A second glance showed a meticulous suitability of dress and manner, brown eyes, beautiful with the beauty of a keen intelligence, and a distinct sense of humour tucked away into the corners of the lips. Corbeyne nodded.

Exactly the right kind of girl. He took the unsealed note she handed him.

"*Dear Corbeyne,*" he read, "*the bearer of this, Miss Vera Fellowes, B.A., (London,) would like to be your secretary, and I have pleasure in giving her an unqualified testimonial. Yours, Carfax.*"

"I will not trouble you with a test, Miss Fellowes," he said. "Lord Carfax's testimonial makes that unnecessary. How soon can you start working for me?"

"Now," she said.

She snapped open an attache case, flung back the cover of a notebook, and waited with fountain-pen poised. Corbeyne smiled. It was the Carfax touch. Miss Fellowes had yet to learn that the majority of Carfax's little tricks had been picked up from John Corbeyne.

"Excellent," he said. "'Dear Lord Carfax, Many thanks for introducing Miss Fellowes, who has expressed herself willing to work for me. We have not yet discussed the matter of salary, but as you have interested yourself I propose to pay Miss Fellowes her former salary with a twenty-five per cent increase if she is in my service at the end of one month. Yours sincerely.' Thank you. Now will you please go and buy a typewriter—here's twenty pounds, that'll cover one of those portable things—send that letter off to Lord Carfax, and join me, as soon as you're through, at Corbeyne House."

"Yes," said Miss Fellowes competently; whereupon Corbeyne left his chambers and hailed a taxi.

He admitted himself with a latchkey, but went straight into the study.

On his desk were a number of letters addressed to himself, opened. He stared at them curiously. Then he remembered that on the previous day there had been no accumulation of correspondence as he might reasonably have expected.

Sylvia opening his letters! That was a thing she had never thought of doing before. Why open his letters? That was surely a liberty unwarrantable even in the circumstances.

His indignation ebbed as he reminded himself of the conditions under which he had left. He had told her that she and Carfax could tell any lie they chose. Obviously she would have to deal with his correspondence. Permission was clearly implied. But now that he was back——

Ah, there was the rub! In what sense had he come back? He stood for a moment, frowning. Then his new self, born of last night's renunciation, clamoured for self-expression. Corbeyne picked up the receiver of the house telephone.

He tried her boudoir. She was not there. Nor in the drawing-room. He was driven to trying the nursery. From there she answered him.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" he asked.

"Certainly," she answered. "I will come down."

In the nursery! He felt a pang of violent curiosity as to what she was telling the Jobber about it all. A confoundedly difficult problem to handle from the point of view of the child! He gritted his teeth. Would she ever allow him to see the Jobber? And how far was this insane pantomime of non-recognition going to extend? He must put it to her there and then and risk her carrying out her threat.

But he did not put it to her when she came in.

She was in white. That startled him because, except on the river, Sylvia had always maintained that in pure white she looked theatrical. And she was right; she did look theatrical. There was a sort of aggressive spotlessness about her, a deliberate assumption of radiance, as when the ingénue appears upon the stage. Corbeyne felt irritated and encouraged the feeling. It helped. It kept him going while Sylvia smiled conventionally and very gracefully inclined her shining head.

"Good morning, Mr. Brierly. I hope everything is as you wish it?"

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Corbeyne?"

She took the chair he offered. The sunlight showed him that there were elusive shadows under her eyes; and that her face was certainly thinner. She looked, for all her immaculate brightness, as though she often could not sleep. . . . Corbeyne had to force himself back to his grievance and his irritation.

"There is just one little point I should like to discuss," he said. "I see you have opened my letters."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. He had seen her before, meet impertinence with that fractional lift of the eyebrows. Did she know he remembered?

"My husband's letters, Mr. Brierly," she corrected.

Pretence within pretence—and all because neither of them dared discuss the reality of their position! There was her pretence that she did not recognise him—there was his pretence that he had justly deserved her refusal to accept him as her husband—the pretence that he had betrayed their love. Between the two pretences they who had been lovers were now antagonists.

The stubborn sexual pride of countless centuries welled within him. As the antagonist of a woman he must prevail, must snatch and hold the upper ground. She had warned him that if he refused her terms she would strike him down. Well, he would not refuse the terms—he would accept them more thoroughly than she had bargained for.

"I see there is a certain misunderstanding as to the nature of our compact which I would like to clear up," he said. "Yesterday morning you recalled Lord Carfax in order to make a stipulation in his presence as to the terms and conditions upon which you were willing to enter this conspiracy of ours."

He paused for an instant. The brightness of her eyes had grown with his every word, and he knew she was remembering the nature of the terms she had made.

"Forgive me for pointing out," he went on, "that you neglected to inquire whether *I* had stipulations to make."

"I understood that you were hardly in a position to make any," she said, and her very faint smile relegated "Mr. Brierly" to the obscurity from which he had sprung.

Corbeyne smiled also, the smile that was known and feared in the "hub of the world."

"Possibly not," he agreed. "But I am in a position to make them now. Lord Carfax's announcement in the papers of last night and this morning has placed me on an equal footing with you two. On the whole I should say that it has placed me in a rather stronger position than either of you. At this moment, were we exposed, I would merely lose attractive work and good pay. You and Lord Carfax would be compelled to leave the country."

Sylvia's loosely held hands made a convulsive movement towards each other; the next second they had relaxed again. "*Touché!*" rang triumphantly through Corbeyne's brain, and then "Game! Jove, how game she is!"—for her eyes were still brightly hard and her lips steady.

"I don't propose to take advantage of the position," he continued, "except to the point of declining to allow either of you to dictate to me the method by which I shall sustain—the character of John Corbeyne."

"You seem eminently capable," she murmured, "of playing your part without instruction from anyone."

He bowed. Sylvia's eyes went with a splendid indifference to her languid hands. Corbeyne smiled again.

"Allow me, then, to state our position. I have agreed to accept your stipulation as to our private relationship. My own stipulation is that in every other respect you shall behave as if I were your husband—John Corbeyne. I am playing his part. It is my

intention to do it with the utmost thoroughness or not to do it at all."

Again there was a silence. Each was waiting for the other to break it. Sylvia had raised her head again, and it seemed to Corbeyne that, for the space of a long breath, there was a new quality in her gaze.

"Your acquiescence will, of course, involve non-interference with my correspondence," he added, and try as he would he could not keep all expression from his voice.

"I——"

"Miss Fellowes, sir." Woodhams stood in the doorway.

"Ask Miss Fellowes to come in, please." Corbeyne turned back to Sylvia. "My secretary. What——?"

Sylvia had risen. She stood with a hand on her chair, her face as white as her dress, her head flung back. She looked eager and yet aghast.

Realisation broke on Corbeyne. Before she could speak, however, Miss Fellowes followed Woodhams into the room.

"Quick work, Miss Fellowes! Anything fresh? Miss Fellowes—my wife."

Sylvia gave a little gasp. Miss Fellowes evidently interpreted it as surprised recognition.

"Mrs. Corbeyne has possibly seen me working for Lord Carfax," she remarked.

"Yes. Yes, I think I have," returned Sylvia. She was distinctly breathless. "But I didn't know your name. How has Lord Carfax been managing without you?"

"I only left him this morning," said Miss Fellowes concisely—and a deep flush of humiliation rose to Sylvia's face as her eyes met Corbeyne's.

"These letters came about half an hour ago," continued Miss Fellowes. She delved into her leather case.

Corbeyne and Sylvia were still looking at each other.

"I will leave you to attend to your correspondence, John," said Sylvia.

Corbeyne felt in every atom of him the tingling joy of his victory.

"Thank you," he said.

Sylvia responded neither by look nor gesture. She had enveloped herself once more in her armour; she had retired into the fathomless depths of herself. But she made atonement to the quite unconscious Miss Fellowes.

"You will lunch with us, I hope, Miss Fellowes?"

"Thank you very much. I should like to. These are the letters, Mr. Corbeyne."

Corbeyne closed the door and came back to reality. He took the letters. One was the authority from the Postmaster-General to demand the identity of Chancery 7124. The other for a moment puzzled him; then the slapdash writing leapt into disastrous familiarity.

He handed the official letter to the girl at his side.

"Miss Fellowes, see to this now, please. Go yourself."

She left the room and he opened the other letter. It informed him that Katherine, by amazing luck, had found a tiny, perfectly sweet flat in Bloomsbury and was moving in a few days, and would have everything all ready in three week's time because, although it was a furnished flat, the furniture was hopeless and it took a long time getting things really nice.

Three weeks' respite.

Corbeyne struck a match and held it to the corner of the letter. There was a faint sound at the door. Sylvia! Could she see what he was doing? Of course she could! She could see that he was burning a letter and she would guess where the letter came from and would be affronted. She would strike back somehow.

"I beg your pardon," said Sylvia very boldly. Corbeyne crouched for the blow. "I forgot to mention that Michael—the child—is unwell. It would add to

the thoroughness of things if you were to inquire after him at lunch."

The cruelty of it made Corbeyne insensible to the pain of flame that had licked up the letter and reached his hand.

"Is he ill? Seriously ill?"

"Oh, I did not intend to bore you with domestic details. It was merely a suggestion. My husband always appeared to be fond of the child."

She was gone.

Corbeyne crushed the charred paper into flakes and threw them aside.

He was still trying to fix his attention on his work when Miss Fellowes returned, unruffled despite the lightning quality of her activities. She brought him an official envelope. The contents ran:

"Dear Sir, In reply to your inquiry per Department H 22, the subscriber to No. 7124 Chancery Exchange is Maulden Mansions, W."

Maulden Mansions! Corbeyne frowned over it. Vaguely he had expected to be confronted with a name he could place. There was something very baffling about Maulden Mansions. Then it dawned on him. Chancery 7124 was the caretaker!

So Katherine's confidant used the caretaker's telephone. Either because he hadn't got one of his own and the caretaker was a friend, or because he had foreseen the possibility of inquiries being made and arranged to communicate only over a borrowed instrument. In that case, he probably lived in Maulden Mansions himself.

"Miss Fellowes, you realise that your work with me, down to its smallest detail, is of a completely confidential nature? Don't be offended. I point it out only because you will do many little odd jobs for me which are apparently unimportant, and you might, in all good faith, mention them in casual conversation with others."

"I think you will not have cause to complain, Mr Corbeyne. I am not talkative and—I was with Lord Carfax for years."

Corbeyne grinned. Miss Fellowes allowed her dimple a moment's liberty.

"Excellent. I want you, as soon as you conveniently can, to call on the caretaker of Maulden Mansions. I don't know his name, but I know he has a telephone. Yesterday evening at about seven a lady, speaking from a call-office at Ealing, rang him up on it. I have a theory that she asked him to summon one of the residents of the Mansions to speak to her. You will test my theory for me by finding out the name of the resident."

"Is the lady personally known to the caretaker?"

"I should say she wasn't, but I can't be certain. And I don't know whether yesterday's call was the first or not. I'm afraid you've very little to go on, but——"

"I've had less," murmured Miss Fellowes.

The lunch gong boomed through the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

POSTMAN'S KNOCK

THE mail, waiting for Corbeyne at Corbeyne House next morning, showed him the extent to which he was already in effect a Minister of the Crown. His election and initiation remained only as a substantially empty formality. Miss Fellowes, crisp as the new day, inquired whether in future he wished his letters to be opened, and routine matters dealt with by herself. Corbeyne, aghast at the formidable pile, gave emphatic assent.

"We're going to be in it up to the neck, Miss Fellowes," he said enthusiastically. "Let's get going."

For the next five days he had the illusion that he never stopped attending to that mail except for tabloid interviews with Carfax, and emissaries of the Prime Minister and various other Government departments. Work rolled upon him in great waves, and he battled with it for sixteen hours a day. There was no time to speculate about Katherine or Sylvia—no time even to remember that Miss Fellowes was tackling the mystery of Chancery 7124. He slept like a log at night, and was at Corbeyne House by nine every morning. Presumably Miss Fellowes was there by eight, for his letters were opened and sorted by the time he arrived. He and she lunched when they could from the trays Woodhams laid silently on the table outside the door. Miss Fellowes, in the little room allotted to her next to the study, was performing daily miracles.

The work must go on.

In those gladly laborious sixteen hours a day, the spirit of John Corbeyne was resting, recuperating, gathering strength for the conflict that was yet to come.

Carfax flitted in and out. Corbeyne had expected him to be huffy over the incident at the Prime Minister's house. He expected that Carfax would demand an explanation, but Carfax didn't. Instead, he became rather more respectful in his manner, and it was not long before Corbeyne guessed the explanation, which lay in the wholly engaging vanity of the world's greatest Blusterer.

On the fifth day, Carfax had floated in with some trivial reminder, and Corbeyne, absorbed in his work, had grunted at him.

Carfax stood back and regarded him with beaming admiration.

"Pygmalion!" he ejaculated. "That's got it. Pygmalion! I have moulded a human derelict into the likeness of John Corbeyne, and the pupil has come to life on the pedestal and instructs the master—damn!"

Lord Carfax turned from the débris of his metaphor, and slipped silently from the room. He returned to put his head in the doorway.

"You'll have to see the mayor to-morrow—it's your election, you know. I'll call for you at eleven. You've only to behave quite naturally, you know. Shake hands with the mayor, and thank him for the honour his borough has done you. Bosh, of course, but very useful bosh!"

There proved to be more to do with the mayor than shake hands with him and thank him. The mayor had to be lunched with in a room in the Town Hall, and Corbeyne had to make the inevitable speech.

"Capital, upon my soul! Capital, capital!" applauded Lord Carfax on the return journey. "Now, let's just run through the programme for to-morrow."

To-morrow was the day of Corbeyne's introduction to Parliament. It turned out a day of ceremonial pottering. Corbeyne had thought the whole business would be a matter of a hour or so, but it elongated itself in endless introductions. Then there came the formal entry into his new Office, which was a spare wing in the War Office. In the office he encountered one of the wonders of Whitehall. To begin with, he had never imagined that his personal activities for the Government would require a building as big as a moderate sized hotel. For another, he found a large staff in being, apparently working hard at the work of a Ministry, which was at that moment coming into existence. There was a Permanent Head, the Secretary, who explained things to him. Uneasily, he began to think there was more in Carfax's theory of a figurehead than he had supposed.

In a couple of crowded days he learnt where the routine work of the staff ceased, and he himself began as the veritable, directing head.

On the third day of his official existence, the Secretary approached him with a wry grin, which Corbeyne had already learnt to associate with trouble in the offing.

"There's a rather hard nut for you to crack here, Mr. Corbeyne," he said, fondling a letter. "It's the Wool people. The combine have been plaguing the Prime Minister for the last six months, as of course you know. He has staved them off, and now he's referred them to you."

"Ah," said Corbeyne. "They want a protective tax, don't they? Well, they can't have it."

"Quite so. But it's an awkward situation. And the head of the combine who will lead the deputation to you is a particularly resourceful man who knows pretty well every rope there is to know."

"Oh? Who is he?"

"Deagle," answered the Secretary. "Will you receive the deputation?"

"Yes," snapped Corbeyne. "The sooner the better. This week, if possible."

"There will be no difficulty about that," laughed the Secretary. "They want to see you this afternoon."

"Good!" said Corbeyne. "I'll see them."

The Secretary conveyed a tactful intimation that it would be well to see the Prime Minister first, and to the Prime Minister Corbeyne went, to inquire whether there were any instructions in the matter.

"I never issue instructions except of a purely negative nature," said the Prime Minister somewhat stiffly. "It is in your department, Mr. Corbeyne. You must deal with the matter as you think fit."

Corbeyne bowed, and was about to withdraw, when the Prime Minister accomplished one of his famous lapses into confidential *bonhomie*.

"They're trying to get you on the hip, my boy," he imparted. "They've been nagging at me. The Wool Combine is one of the reasons why we decided on a Ministry of Credit. The old game! This import tax business is a Party question, and we are supposed to have finished with Party politics. Yours is a non-party office, and we can do a good many things through you that we couldn't do ourselves. Be as ingenious as you can with the Combine and do your best not to commit yourself. Deagle, by the way, is a devil."

That was all the help he got from the Prime Minister. It was the things the Prime Minister did not say that told John Corbeyne where he stood. He was able to grasp for the first time that the Government had erected him as a scape-goat, a whipping-boy. If the economic need of the country were to force the Government to an unpopular step, the step could be taken and the price paid at the sacrifice of the new Minister.

He smiled grimly. He was wondering what Sylvia's attitude would be if his own career were broken through political necessity. Possibly she might be sympathetic.

He found himself positively looking forward to the deputation from the Wool Combine.

There were fourteen members of the Deputation; five of them brought secretaries who were accommodated at a side table.

The Deputation was seated and rose as John Corbeyne entered the lofty room. Carfax had taken care to drill him in the etiquette of the occasion. He seated them and listened to the formal introduction of the Deputation by an obscure M.P. whom he was supposed to know, but did not.

As the spokesman warmed to his subject, Corbeyne learned, with surprise, that he knew the speaker with comparative intimacy, that the speaker was in the confidence of Corbeyne and so of the Government in general. What Carfax called bluster, he decided, and stopped listening. He looked around for Deagle.

He had known of Deagle for years as a rather questionable manipulator in the wool-market—one of Carfax's bugbears. Until the run on the bank—and there was a pretty good case in support of Gorlay's theory that Deagle had caused it—Corbeyne had always tended to make light of Carfax's warnings. Since then, the danger of Deagle had been confirmed by the Prime Minister himself. A financial grafter, evidently; a swift and silent power.

Deagle was easy enough to identify. He was the leader of the Deputation and sat at the foot of the table of which Corbeyne himself occupied the head. Corbeyne was faintly startled—Deagle was so unlike his fancied picture. He was a neat, prepossessing man in the middle forties. Iron grey hair, aquiline features, broad-set, colourless eyes that gleamed benevolently. There was a suggestion of physical niceness about him that made one think of a noble lord in a good-class melodrama. Most assuredly he did not look the sort of man who——

Deagle was on his feet. He was speaking in the grave, confident yet kindly tone that harmonised with his physical appearance.

"Before we discuss the business that has brought us here, I would like to say, on behalf of myself and my colleagues of this Deputation, that it is a matter of profound personal regret to us that the exigencies of our industry compel us to thrust a thorny question before your notice, sir, at the very commencement of your term of Office." There was nearly five minutes of it.

Corbeyne said that it was a great pleasure to him to have the privilege of meeting at the outset of his career so distinguished a federation of the leaders of commerce, and begged the deputation to state its business.

"I shall call upon Mr. Catlett, of Catlett and Son, to lay our case before you, sir," said Deagle.

Catlett! The name was in some vague way familiar, thought Corbeyne. He glanced at the man who now rose to his feet. No, he was certain he had not met him in the whirl of introductions during the last few days. He could forget a name as easily as anybody, but he rarely forgot a face. Yet he had heard the name somewhere before. Mr. Catlett was speaking.

Corbeyne was compelled to give his whole attention. It was a long speech, lasting fully half an hour. Corbeyne made an occasional note, but for controversial purposes only. The object of the Deputation was very plain to him. He realised there was a certain grim humour in Deagle's reference to the new Minister. For all the allusion to his standing in the world of finance they were counting upon his being unable to see through a device for a very patent piece of profiteering.

Catlett was much more the type of the too shrewd financier. Rather bloated about the features, decidedly

beady about the eyes. . . . Catlett had finished and another man was talking.

Other speeches were made, ringing the changes on the same theme that it would be to the interests of the nation to pass the measure they demanded. None of them mentioned that the effect of the measure would be to allow the Wool Combine to raise their prices to the public.

Corbeyne's mind had been made up within ten minutes. He listened enough to keep an ear open for any genuine argument that might be advanced and heard none.

He was already considering the terms of his reply when he felt his eye drawn to the table where the secretaries were sitting.

He looked up—straight into the eyes of Mr. Pelt—Mr. Pelt, of Ealing, who played quite like a professional, was something in the City—was secretary to Catlett of Catlett and Son. That, of course, was where he had heard the name—in Katherine's gimcrack drawing-room. Mr. Pelt had shown a surprising competence at Postman's Knock—that wonderfully silly kissing business.

Mr. Pelt stared back at him very hard indeed, and then abruptly removed his eyes.

At the same moment someone touched Corbeyne upon the arm. A messenger was proffering a note.

"What's that?" snapped Corbeyne.

"Very urgent, sir. From Miss Fellowes."

Corbeyne tore it open. There were only a few lines in the secretary's handwriting.

"Re inquiries at Maulden Mansions. The resident who answered the telephone call from Ealing on the evening of the tenth is Mr. Mortimer Deagle, leader of the Deputation with you now."

Postman's Knock! An odd phrase! He had heard it before somewhere in a different connection. Yes, of course, a boxing term! ('A blow to the body

followed with lightning rapidity by a blow to the jaw') The lightning rapidity was there all right. Pelt—Deagle—Postman's Knock! . . . Generally a knock-out!

The Deputation was awaiting the Minister's reply.

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CHAPTER XXIV

NO COMPROMISE

CORBEYNE made a pretence of sorting his notes to cover his breathlessness. He felt quite genuinely breathless.

So Chancery 7124 was Deagle!

Deagle! It was astounding, Corbeyne told himself, that in his speculations as to the identity of Katherine's furtive friend he had considered only the possible danger to his private life. He had prepared for blackmail, but a blackmail based on his purely personal circumstances. This sudden linking up of Katherine's double-dealing with the big business of the Wool Combine was a development so unexpected that he could not immediately focus it. Let's see, how would it work out when Deagle and he came to grips? "If as Minister of Credit you interfere with me and my gang of grafters I'll——"

What?

Corbeyne found himself on his feet, speaking with ease. The Prime Minister's counsel was in his ears. "Always talk about something else—there is always something else. . . ." In the meantime one could think.

"Gentlemen, I thank you for the clarity with which you have stated your case. Do not be misled when I say that you have thoroughly convinced me that the measure you advocate would place the industry you represent on a very firm footing."

Catlett seemed about to remark, "Hear, hear," but Corbeyne fixed him with his eye and willed him to silence. Catlett was Pelt's employer. Would Pelt reveal to him the enormity of his discovery, or would he keep it for the Press?

"It would no doubt be a comparatively easy matter for the Government to stimulate any given industry by the methods you propose. The Government, however, is faced with many problems. . . ."

Corbeyne enlarged upon the problems with which the Government was faced. He was looking at Deagle. He was a pleasant if faintly formidable contrast to the others who were politely attentive; his expression was that of one who thinks he is successfully masking his boredom. Corbeyne realised ironically that in one sense he had as yet the advantage of Deagle. He knew that Deagle apparently found it worth his while to employ subtle, underhand methods in order to obtain information about the private life of the Minister of Credit. And Deagle did not know that he knew.

Deagle re-crossed his legs and raised a hand to his mouth. It might have been a yawn that he hid, or a smile.

Something stirred in Corbeyne. Deagle, Pelt, Katherine—spying, intriguing, haggling, cheating—holding up the clean, keen work that saved men's souls alive—damn them, damn them all! If they did their worst at once they could not baulk him yet: they could not drag him down to-day or to-morrow, and already the work had been begun, and to-day and to-morrow would set their seal upon it and speed it upon an unassailable way. *The work must go on.*

He took mental grasp of Deagle and Pelt and Katherine and hurled them aside along with the "something else" that had been filling the minutes up so neatly. The change in his tone made Catlett blink.

"In the present crisis, the gravity of which it is impossible to exaggerate," continued Corbeyne, "the

Government could take no more fatal step than to favour one industry at the expense of another. I regret, therefore, gentlemen, that I can hold out no hope whatever of the Government being able to accept your proposals in the near future."

Corbeyne sat down.

The Deputation looked definitely shocked. They missed the old ministerial evasions and platitudinous assurances—they missed the official optimism. Not that they ever took these things seriously, but they felt that the dignity of their presence should at least inspire a Minister with the desire to fool them. An uncompromising "No" was a new element in dealing with the Government. It pained and surprised them.

Catlett was on his feet, re-arguing his point. Corbeyne was thinking that there would be trouble with the Prime Minister when his answer was reported. But then there would be trouble with Pelt and Deagle too. "No" was the proper answer to that Deputation of sharks, and the more plainly they received it within the limits of courtesy the better for themselves and the nation. . . . If Catlett were to go on talking like that he would get an even straighter answer.

But Catlett did not go on talking at all because Deagle interrupted him. Catlett did not seem to mind. Evidently Deagle ruled with a rod of iron. His face had the rod-of-iron look, thought Corbeyne. He was too genuinely authoritative to be in the least aggressive. Funny a man like that slinking in to the porter's lodge for a furtive conversation on the telephone! The riddle as to how he had come into contact with Katherine and acquired such ascendancy over her would have to wait. Deagle was uttering flowery platitudes and Corbeyne could see that his object was to get himself and his Deputation out of the room. Here, at any rate, was the blemish in Deagle's manner. He was much too flowery for a gentleman. . . . Hullo, he could be thorny, too.

“ . . . at a later date, when—I accept full responsibility for the statement—I shall hope to bring fresh facts to the notice of the Minister of Credit and present our case in a somewhat different light.”

Chancery 7124, thought Corbeyne. That would be the different light in which Deagle would state his case to the Minister of Credit. Pelt would probably want five hundred or so. Deagle wanted corruption of the Ministry. Well, it was an age old problem and there would be plenty of precedents to guide him in a choice. Every man has his price. He knew Deagle's and he had guessed Pelt's. He would have to fix his own price. Should he demand the safety of Sylvia and the Jobber or the unblemished honour of John Corbeyne? A bit difficult, that! In the jargon of his new trade, he would require notice of that question.

The Deputation withdrew.

CHAPTER XXV

SCANDAL

WHEN Mr. Pelt, of Ealing, and of Catlett and Son, had looked across the massive room in which the Wool Combine deputation had been received, and recognised the new Minister of Credit as Mr. Brierly, late of Ealing, he had dropped his eyes.

Mr. Pelt was at heart unshakably respectable, and the whole significance of his discovery had genuinely shocked him. His belief in human nature, his bland confidence in the personal integrity of the governing class, were alike outraged.

There was also a vivid memory of that conversation in which he had discussed John Corbeyne with—John Corbeyne. Mr. Pelt had a vast sense of dignity, and he had jeopardised his own dignity by allowing himself to be made a fool of on a grand scale.

While Corbeyne had been speaking—particularly while he was deliberately flouting the deputation—Mr. Pelt, in all honesty, assured himself that when the deputation had finished its business he would go up to the Minister and say, “Well, Mr. Corbeyne, how is Mrs. Brierly?”

He was eventually deterred from this course, not by fear—for Mr. Pelt’s blood was up and all the world might know it—but by an almost incredible ignorance of the powers of a Cabinet Minister, coupled with an

uneasy suspicion that if a Minister of the Crown were really put to it there was no knowing what he couldn't do, with the King and the others to back him up. For himself he would not have minded—in fact he welcomed them to do their worst—but he was bound, as a man of honour, to consider the possible peril of Mrs. Pelt.

The same sense of filial duty restrained him from carrying out his second plan of taking a taxi to the nearest newspaper office, and, in return for a thousand or so—he would not haggle—revealing the details of this truly appalling Scandal in High Life. By the time he had actually left the building he had decided to sleep upon it.

In point of fact he slept very little upon it. The result of his wakefulness was that on the following morning when he had finished taking letters from the dictation of Mr. Catlett, he braced himself, and, as rehearsed in the train, said:

"Can I speak to you a minute, sir, about the Deputation?"

"Yes," said Catlett. "Have you messed up your notes?"

"No, sir," said Mr. Pelt with what dignity he could muster. "I wish to know whether—that is, if I could do anything in the matter where the Deputation has failed—if I could count on your recognising the fact when the measure becomes law."

Catlett wheeled round in his chair.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded.

It was a dangerous moment. The diplomatic innuendoes laboriously composed on the Underground would obviously prove inadequate.

"I know something about Mr. Corbeyne's private life which wouldn't do him any good to have talked about."

Again Catlett stared with a cold, fishy eye.

"I can see you've not been drinking," he said slowly.

"I presume you're speaking the truth—which is all the worse for you. What's this tale you've got hold of?"

Mr. Pelt was most deeply offended by the use of the "tale."

"I prefer to keep that to myself in the present instance, sir," he said stiffly.

"Yes, and you'll jolly well keep it to yourself in all the other instances if you've got a grain of sense," snapped Catlett. "Look here, Pelt. I don't know what you think you've got hold of and I don't particularly want to. You have a good enough record here, and I should be sorry to lose you. If you're idiot enough to try blackmailing a Cabinet Minister you'll be breaking stones for the next five years instead of taking letters from me. When you've finished those you've got there, you'd better go home—get into the open air for a bit."

When he had finished the letters Mr. Pelt left the office and went to the Ministry of Credit. Here, his inability to state his business frustrated his efforts to see John Corbeyne.

Over lunch he leant with his elbows on the marble-topped table and pondered miserably upon the deplorable lack of justice in a land that called itself civilised. Things had come to a pretty pass when a respectable citizen was refused a hearing by the mandarins of Whitehall!

His thoughts were forming themselves into familiar phrases. He had heard that somewhere before. Then came inspiration.

The Plain Man.

The Plain Man would stand up for him. *The Plain Man* would always stand up for anybody against anybody else, provided the anybody else were sufficiently well-known, and provided also that the anybody else did not happen to be a liberal advertiser. Some million of anybodies bought *The Plain Man* every week to read rude things in it about the anybody elses. *The Plain*

Man was reputed to have a reserve capital of twenty thousand pounds earmarked for libel actions. To the offices of *The Plain Man* Mr. Pelt betook himself.

In one of the many waiting rooms of *The Plain Man* Mr. Pelt told his tale to a tired and somewhat elderly 'junior,' who, when he had finished, looked him up and down and asked the apparently irrelevant question as to whether he were in work.

Receiving an affirmative answer the elderly junior bade Mr. Pelt wait, and departed. Mr. Pelt waited for an hour, and then, somewhat to his surprise, was shown into the presence of the chief editor, a man with whose features the million of anybodies was well familiar.

"Good afternoon, Pelt," said the Chief editor. "What's this story of yours?"

Mr. Pelt began to tell his story again, and jumped as a typewriter behind him clanged into action.

"It's all right," snapped the chief editor, "that fellow can go as hard as you can talk. Carry on."

Mr. Pelt coughed, stammered and carried on. The chief editor pulled him up at once with the rather puzzling assurance that he need not be nervous as nothing he was saying now would be published. Mr. Pelt very soon finished and the chief editor began. There were about a dozen leading questions, and for each the typewriter throbbed and clanged.

The last question startled Mr. Pelt.

"Is all this true?"

It was perfectly true as Mr. Pelt had recounted it, but that did not prevent his cheeks burning.

"Of course it's true, sir." He had not meant to say "sir"—it had slipped out.

"Right!" The typist handed the chief editor his script. The chief editor ran his eye over the pages, then turned again to Mr. Pelt.

"I might be able to use some of this. . . . You assure me it's all true. A solicitor will be here in a few minutes—a Commissioner of Oaths—and you can sign

an affidavit. You know what that means? Two years for perjury if there's a single material lie here."

With a policeman waiting to arrest him if he had lied, and a Cabinet Minister with unknown powers ready to menace him if he had told the truth, Mr. Pelt felt that in a moment panic would grip him. He floundered into a futile protest.

"If you can't take the word of a man of honour——"

"Come, Pelt, if you're telling the truth there's nothing to be afraid of. If you're lying, you're trying to obtain money from me by false pretences."

In his exasperation Mr. Pelt, though of the sterner sex, was dangerously near tears. Week by week *The Plain Man* had implied to him that its editor was a bluff, kindly sportsman, champion of the weak, and here was this shrewd-eyed, hard-headed bully who called him "Pelt" without any "Mr." and threatened him with two years' imprisonment.

"I won't sign anything—not on any account," he blustered and made for the door.

"You're surely too intelligent to be frightened by a mere legal formality," said the chief editor more reasonably. "I don't accuse you of lying but we are bound to protect ourselves. Look here, we'll leave out the trimmings. Sign an affidavit that you talked with Corbeyne in that maisonnette at Ealing and you'll walk out of this building a hundred pounds the richer."

Mr. Pelt took the knob of the door firmly between his hands. A hundred pounds, with a policeman waiting on one side

"Any time you like to change your mind about signing, there's the hundred waiting for you," the chief editor shot after him as he hurried from the office.

After this disillusionment in the offices of *The Plain Man*, Mr. Pelt had serious thoughts of dropping the thing altogether. But over supper with his mother his spirits revived sufficiently for his interest to re-awaken.

"Did it ever strike you there was anything suspicious about our friends the Brierlys?" he asked.

"Acquaintances, if you please, Robert," said Mrs. Pelt. "I'm not saying a word against Mrs. Brierly, mind, but as for there being anything suspicious—well, if you *mean* suspicious you'd better ask me if I'd noticed anything that *wasn't* suspicious. What have you heard?"

"Suppose I was to tell you," said Mr. Pelt, "that Mr. Brierly was none other than John Corbeyne himself."

Mrs. Pelt looked interested and then puzzled.

"Were they living under a false name, then?" she asked eagerly.

"I'm telling you that Mr. Brierly is John Corbeyne," repeated Mr. Pelt impatiently.

"And who's John Corbeyne when he's at home?" countered Mrs. Pelt. "And you needn't speak so sharply."

"John Corbeyne is a Cabinet Minister," said Mr. Pelt, with a deliberation which was intended to be sarcastic. "You know what that is, don't you? Well, he's the new Minister of Credit."

"What, him there was a picture of in the paper this morning?" echoed Mrs. Pelt incredulously.

"That's the one—the very identical," said Mr. Pelt. "It was him we saw in the Deputation yesterday."

Mrs. Pelt looked profoundly disappointed.

"How you do get things in your head, Robert!" she complained. "You've been talking about nothing but that Deputation for the last fortnight—and now you've taken to fancying things, and I did think you'd really heard something."

"Fancying things! I tell you I've seen him. Sat opposite him an hour or more at the Deputation."

"I know all about the Deputation," said Mrs. Pelt. "And if you're telling me that a man like that, that had to have Deputations, and sits in Parliament and is one

of the Heads—in the Royal Circle you might almost say—if you're telling me that that man is going to pretend he's the husband of a woman like that who keeps on throwing things in your teeth and dines out almost every night—why, you'll be getting yourself into trouble for saying such things."

Mr. Pelt ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'll take my affidavit——" he began and checked himself hastily.

"You'd better be careful what you're saying, Robert my boy," repeated Mrs. Pelt. "I don't care for such talk here. I'm not the one to slander any woman and take away her good name, and I don't like to hear my son doing it—though in some cases, I'll admit, it's a strong temptation.

"Besides, if she was *that*, there'd have been a limousine and a Japanese butler likely as not, and a French maid, him being one of the Heads—not but what she wouldn't have if she'd had the chance, and I'll own I did think she had when she was here before with a ring and no husband; but I was wrong there, and so I told Mrs. Brierly at once."

Mrs. Pelt burbled on. In her mind, *sin*, as she thought of it, was inextricably associated with champagne, henna, and the place lit up till all hours. Katherine had dodged these things and so Mrs. Pelt, measuring Mrs. Brierly by the most rigid of Ealing's standards, had been reluctantly compelled to admit that she passed muster.

"You always were one for ideas," she said to her son, and found herself obliged to leave it at that.

Mr. Pelt was no longer angry. He was impressed. When his mother utterly refused to accept a sensationally unpleasant truth about one of her neighbours it was time to ask oneself where one stood.

After constant repetition of the question in the privacy of his room, Mr. Pelt came to the conclusion that he stood as the champion of public morality and

that as such as he was faced with an Unpleasant Duty. He had tried to go in a straightforward manner to the man himself, but had been kicked from the doors for his pains (a very gross libel on the reception clerk at the Ministry); he had tried to ventilate the scandal in the Press and had been threatened with imprisonment (by this time it was quite easy for Mr. Pelt to see that *The Plain Man* was "in Corbeyne's pay"). There remained one course only—to open the eyes of Corbeyne's poor deluded wife. By the time he retired to bed Mr. Pelt felt sorry for her, profoundly sorry. . . . He would have to put it delicately.

The telephone book gave him the address and on the following day he left the City during his luncheon interval and took a 'bus to St. James's.

He had no difficulty in finding Corbeyne House. In a sense Corbeyne House came upon him unexpectedly as he turned the corner. He gaped at it and then walked past it unconcernedly. Then he walked back again intending to mount the steps and press the bell-push.

Somehow Corbeyne's wife was not so clearly poor and deluded as she had been on the previous night. Looking at Corbeyne House he glimpsed her as a stately lady formidably entrenched behind butlers. He became conscious of his tie—and his boots were rather muddy. It wouldn't do for the butler to make a mistake. . . . By this time he had again passed the house. Now he came to think of it, lunch-time was a very tactless hour for a call of such a nature.

Mr. Pelt went back to the City and for three hours, in the intervals of attending to Mr. Catlett's letters, faced the bitter fact that he had funked it.

At five-thirty, with a new tie, a clean collar and boots newly shined in Piccadilly, he had pressed the bell-push of Corbeyne House, having fortified himself with the assurance that there was not a flunkey alive whom he was afraid of. He intended to be firm.

Woodhams, however, offered no field for firmness. He seemed to take it for granted that there was nothing odd in Mr. Pelt wishing to speak to Mrs. Corbeyne, showed him politely into the morning-room and went in search of his mistress.

Mr. Pelt had come fully prepared. While he waited, carefully sitting well back in the chair to give himself confidence, he rehearsed the dialogue. "I had the privilege of meeting your husband at his maisonnette in Ealing." "Ealing, Mr. Pelt! I think you must be mistaken!" "Madam, I perceive that I have blundered. I humbly beg your pardon. Forget every word I have said for the sake of your peace of mind!"

The door opened. Mr. Pelt sprang to his feet a great deal more quickly than he had intended. He had thought that she would be pale and wistful, though at first, haughty. She was in reality alert, vital, carrying her beauty magnificently, yet with indifference.

"Mr. Pelt?"

Mr. Pelt bowed.

"Mrs. Corbeyne, I believe?"

"You wish to see me. Won't you sit down?"

Mrs. Corbeyne was business-like, with just a trace of being able to spare him only five minutes, and quite uncurious.

Mr. Pelt sat down.

"Thank you, Mrs. Corbeyne. Er——"

Mrs. Corbeyne waited. She tapped the fingers of one hand very gently on the arm of her chair. Mr. Pelt swallowed twice. She glanced openly at the clock—very bad manners, that, Ealing would have said. Mr. Pelt felt beads of moisture spring to his brow. Then, quite without meaning it, he had taken the plunge.

"I—I had the privilege of meeting your husband at his maisonnette in Ealing."

"Yes?"

Mr. Pelt had once on Brighton pier hurled his entire weight at a punching-ball and missed the punching-

ball. The incident flitted through his brain in distorted shape when Sylvia Corbeyne said, in exactly the same tone of voice in which she had invited him to sit down :

"Yes?"

"I—I didn't know whether you had ever been there, Mrs. Corbeyne," he managed, remembering that he had resolved to put it to her delicately. Her fingers were still tapping, but her eyes no longer strayed to the clock. They were gazing straight into his. He could feel them with his spine.

"I think you mean, Mr. Pelt, that you didn't know I *knew* about my husband's maisonnette in—er—Ealing. I knew—I know; and I have really no desire to increase my knowledge."

There was another nerve-racking pause. Pelt could not move his eyes from the steel-blue of hers, and yet he could notice many things about her and her surroundings; as that her dress had a golden petticoat or something underneath it and that there was a sort of coat of arms carved into the oak above the hearth.

"Well?"

Mr. Pelt putting it to himself as mildly as possible, had had enough of it. He gained his feet and sidled towards the door.

"In that case, madam," he said, his dignity spurring him to a last effort, "I humbly beg your pardon. Forget every word I have said."

She had risen. She cut in:

"There is no need. You have not hurt my feelings. But I should like to know"—she looked at him with the impersonal interest of a student of human nature—"why you gave yourself the trouble of coming here to say this?"

"Well, I—er—I—er—thought you ought to know," faltered Mr. Pelt.

"But—I cannot be anything to you as you've never seen me before. Is my husband perhaps an enemy of yours?" The tone was still devastatingly impersonal,

the steely glance held only the awareness of the collector watching the new specimen under the microscope.

"Well, I can't say that, Mrs. Corbeyne," admitted Mr. Pelt squirming. "Come to think of it, he's always been very civil. He's never done me any harm personally."

"And yet you came here with the intention of harming him?"

Still no scorn, no wonder. Yet Mr. Pelt felt a desperate necessity to defend himself.

"No," he said stoutly. "I didn't think anything about harming him. I thought you wouldn't know, and you ought to—t'isn't right you shouldn't know. 'Tisn't right you shouldn't——" Mr. Pelt was regaining a fraction of his nerve. "'Tisn't right—'tisn't natural—you shouldn't care——"

She swept his protesting moral sense aside in a way he thought most high-handed.

"You have reminded my husband about your knowledge, I take it?"

"No. He knew me at Ealing. He doesn't know I've found out who he really is. Good af——"

"I see. At last we have got to the root of the matter. You have realised that we can't afford to have this unpleasant little secret noised abroad. You are quite right. I am willing to bargain with you, Mr. Pelt. How much do you want to keep quiet about it?"

Mr. Pelt steadied himself against the door. Then, for the first time in his life he attained a true dignity.

"Look here, Mrs. Corbeyne. I've made a fool of myself, and you're entitled to make me squirm and laugh to yourself about me, but you've no right to insult me to my face. I'm going."

Mr. Pelt went. She had treated him like dirt, she had interrupted him, looked past him at the clock, and finally, when his outraged morality had insisted on the wickedness of it all, she had pretended to think he wanted money—she with her brazen eyes who had

never even blinked when an honest stranger, a man who could have been a real friend in need, walked into her own home and told her that her husband was unfaithful to her.

Mr. Pelt, descending the steps of Corbeyne House, seethed with indignation. This kind of thing that was eating like a—like an asp into the roses of the upper classes—this kind of thing had got to stop. It had got to be exposed.

And Mr. Pelt was the man to expose it.

CHAPTER XXVI

A LITTLE HOMILY

SINCE Corbeyne's first tragic departure, Lord Carfax had found his former ward more than a little difficult to deal with. The note of cheery badinage, of delicious impudence, had gone from her voice.

"She's got a habit of attending closely to what you say and then disagreeing with you," he told himself in the car that took him to Corbeyne House. "She hasn't pulled my leg for six weeks. And, damn it, some of the things she says are not quite nice."

In Sylvia's drawing-room he approached his point with a certain amount of diffidence.

"I want to talk to you about—ah—about——"

"Mr. Brierly?" suggested Sylvia.

Carfax scowled.

"I never care to use the name," he said petulantly.

"It isn't wise, Sylvia. However, you're right. Do you think he's running quite straight?"

Sylvia went quite tense. A hard, quick colour came to her face, and then as quickly faded, leaving unmistakable shadows under her eyes.

"In what sense do you mean, Jim?" she asked, and then added, before he could answer her—"We haven't the right to demand that he shall resign his—private life, have we?"

Carfax looked surprised.

"I don't know anything about his private life—it don't matter, so far as I can see, so long as he keeps it somewhere where it can't pop up and upset things."

Sylvia opened her lips to speak and then shut them again.

"It's the other side of his life—our side—that's been getting me lately," Carfax went on. "This impersonation, you know——" He broke off, shaking his head doubtfully.

"He's doing it quite creditably, isn't he?" Sylvia's voice was indifferent. "Though I should think that with all—John's—notes and memoranda to guide him, he couldn't fail to do it creditably."

"Guide him!" repeated Carfax irritably. "Guide him, indeed! Nothing guides him. I can't guide him, the Premier can't guide him, I don't believe John, if he were here in the flesh, could guide him! I don't want to alarm you, Sylvia, but I'm beginning to think we've set a beggar on horseback who'll drag us both into the mire—what on earth are you looking pleased about?"

Sylvia actually blushed. She assured him, however, that she had as little cause to be pleased about anything as he had.

"They may smell a rat," he said, reverting to his grievance.

"I can't follow that metaphor, Jim," she said. "Who is the rat?"

"I mean that the Prime Minister will guess that a man of John Corbeyne's sound commonsense would never rush like a bull in a china shop, and make enemies right and left for himself and the Government. At this juncture John himself would have had the decency to admit that I was right about Deagle, and he'd have gone warily. You'll allow me that much anyhow."

"As a matter of fact, Jim," said Sylvia slowly, "I have very little idea what you're so sore about. I'm afraid I don't agree with you. I think that he is doing

—my husband's work—excellently, and I would not like to interfere with him even if I could. Even if I could——” the words were a whisper.

An unpleasant suspicion crept into Carfax's mind.

“I say, you haven't been reading any more of that German philosophy stuff, have you?” he asked.

“Dear Jim, how your mind does jump!” said Sylvia. “Yes. No. Probably; I can't remember. Why do you ask?”

Lord Carfax felt extremely uncomfortable. Following the vague suspicion his mind had envisaged a burning duty. He braced himself and took the plunge.

“Look here, Sylvia, I used to be your guardian and all that. I can talk to you about anything, can't I?”

“Of course! You always do, Jim.”

“That's not what I mean,” faltered Carfax, and then shot straight at his mark. “What I mean is, all this German philosophy stuff—there's something in it and that's the worst of it—had a striking proof of that in my own person. Auto-suggestion! Subconsciousness! Never know where you are with those two. Between 'em they may land you in no end of mischief. Suppose, for example, your subconsciousness got busy registering that this man is really your husband—well, then, don't you see, auto-suggestion steps in and the—ah—pent-up emotions, as it were—hang it all, Sylvia, for God's sake interrupt me!”

Lord Carfax felt at that moment that he would thoroughly have enjoyed being kicked by someone. He glared at Sylvia who half closed her eyes and opened them again.

“I see what you mean, Jim,” she said, in that unmodulated matter-of-fact tone which made him wish that she would jeer at him as she used. “You think I'm in danger of falling in love with him. Or perhaps you think I have done so already with my—er—subconsciousness, I think you said. But my brain doesn't work like that, and the subject does not embarrass me

half as much as it embarrasses you. However, I can set your mind at rest. I shall never love anyone but my husband."

Lord Carfax wondered what to make of that speech. He tried manfully to leave himself in the dark, but found that he could not.

"Do you mean that you would take your husband back if he were to come back?" he asked.

"I mean that if he were to come back to me as my husband—with hands cleansed—not clean, but cleansed Jim—I would love him again. It has dawned on me within the last ten minutes that that is how it is with me. I didn't know before."

Lord Carfax stroked the back of his head. He did not care for grammatical distinctions outside of the preparation of copy. Not clean but cleansed—made clean. He found himself thinking of the Salvation Army. And she had discovered it during the last ten minutes: while he had been talking to her about Brierly, in fact. He determined not to feel offended. She had been through a great deal.

"Well, my dear," he said, rising, "after what you've said there's nothing for us to do but mark time and hold a watching brief, and while hoping for the best prepare for the worst."

"Dear old Jim," said Sylvia. "You're always such a comfort."

That would have been all right in the old days, thought Carfax, but things had so changed that on the way back to his flat he asked himself whether she had meant it.

Sylvia would never lie, he told himself, as he undressed that night. But according to these German johnnies you can never tell whether you're lying or not. Damned lunatics!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SUSPENDED KISS

ON the following Monday morning, John Corbeyne received two letters from the Detective Agency. One told him that Shrager, the pivot of the whole conspiracy, had left England for New York in the *Hildegonda* in March last under his own name, that he had returned to England four months later and that the Agency was doing its best to find him.

The second letter was to the effect that his own movements were being shadowed. The information caused him no surprise, but at the same time puzzled him. Deagle was in possession of all the main facts. What more did he hope to gain by the shadowing process?

Still, it would probably be as well to shake off anyone who might be following him when he went to Katherine. He glanced at his pocket diary. The period of grace had been mercilessly curtailed by a note received that morning warning him that she would be ready to receive him on Tuesday—the day on which he was to address the House. He had received at his chambers two or three such scrappy communications from Katherine—brief, excited scrawls concerned with the trivialities of the flat in Red Lion Square. Each reminded him superfluously of his promise. That was typical of Katherine. She had always automatically discounted the security of any but a money pledge.

As he destroyed the letter he put the matter from his mind. He had lately made the discovery that it is extraordinarily easy to live on the edge of a precipice provided the precipice is high enough. Speculation on the movements of Deagle, of Katherine, of Pelt, on his own future were at once endless and futile. Their very futility saved him from being haunted by them. He even regarded Pelt's visit to Sylvia, of which she had promptly told him, as little more than a pin-prick. The work demanded every particle of mental energy he could give it.

There was a formal interview with Blenkiron and two other magnates of the Banking Trust. There were the routine demands of the Secretary and three telephone conversations with Carfax. The day seemed to slip under his fingers, whirling him to the moment when he would have to lay before the House—in a sense, before the civilised world—the hope of economic salvation. He supposed that he would suffer from a nervous consciousness of the enormous issues at stake.

When the moment came and he faced a crowded House, there was no room in his brain for nervousness. The personal part of him was wholly submerged in the official pleader. Katherine—Sylvia herself—were remote unrealities.

As he rose to his feet to make his maiden speech he was given a small ovation, in which those whom he knew to be his opponents conspicuously joined. It was the sporting spirit of the House. He waited, trying to look appreciative. Confound these gentlemen sportsmen, he thought! They were going to make a courteous, prettily conducted contest of it—with those millions starving on the Continent, reaching bony hands to drag that same sleek, gentlemanly House into the common abyss of ruin.

He tried to tell them so in his preamble. Using the full weight of his reputation as a financier, he spoke of

the gravity of the situation. He denied that the Government could produce a panacea. The measure he proposed was a mere device of which he could prophesy with confidence no more than a temporary alleviation.

He caught the Prime Minister's eye and ignored it. Then he went on to outline his proposal in detail.

The Corbeyne scheme was of the simplest nature. No one denied that international poverty had been caused by the breakdown of international trade. This in turn was caused by the fluctuation of the exchanges. The Government proposed to stabilise the exchanges by means of the Ministry of Credit, which would become, in effect, a national underwriter, charging no fee for underwriting. Every British trader, who made a contract with a foreigner, would be guaranteed by the Department against an adverse fluctuation of the exchanges between the signing of the contract and the delivery of the goods. It was anticipated that the mere opening of the Department would be sufficient to secure its object without the payment of a single penny. At the same time, the Government proposed a Central Guarantee Fund of twenty millions, of which the Government would supply half and the other half would be provided by the banks—so confident were the bankers in the value of the Government's proposal.

There were details of the scheme that had to be elaborated. Corbeyne spoke for an hour and a half, in the course of which he had only once to consult his notes.

There was more applause, and he sat down—applause that was prolonged to the utmost by the Government supporters. In the din the Prime Minister spoke to him.

"Good, except for the opening," he said. "You frightened them too much. It'll be a close thing."

It was a close thing. Corbeyne who knew little of Parliamentary procedure, gathered that the Bill

was being introduced by "Motion and Leave," instead of by "Presentation." Discussion immediately followed.

Deagle was in the House, but did not himself speak. But there were others of his supporters who did. They showed no violent antagonism to the purpose of the Bill, but cried aloud at the danger of committing the Government to fresh expenditure at a time when, on the Minister's own admission, the situation had never been darker. A division was forced and the Motion was passed by the narrowest majority since the Government had been in power.

Outside the Chamber Corbeyne was surrounded by supporters of the Government, who congratulated him, grinned at him, warned him, worked the House jokes upon him. It was all a part of the game, he thought, the game of associating personality with national issues. He was taking it good-temperedly enough when a member whom he did not know thrust his way through the knot and whispered to him.

"Mrs. Corbeyne is in the House. She's fainted. We've taken her to your rooms."

Corbeyne stared; then, without apologies or thanks, thrust his way out of the crowd. He reached the main door of the suite, and almost flung himself into the quiet room beyond.

A window had been opened wide and stray breaths of air were wandering about the room, fluttering papers. Corbeyne found himself by the side of an austere sofa. Sylvia lay on it, her head resting on a rolled-up coat which he recognised dimly as belonging to Miss Fellowes. The little summer winds lifted the tendrils of hair from Sylvia's cheek and dropped them again, caressingly. Some soft, delicately shaded stuff at her throat was stirring too. And there was Miss Fellowes gathering up smelling-salts and scent-sprays and slipping quietly into the next apartment. She was remarkable, not alone for her efficiency.

Sylvia's hands lay weakly, palm upward, against her side. Corbeyne laid his fingers on her wrist and felt the pulse leap and quicken. While he still bent over her, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I'm sorry," she said. He could barely catch the words. "I'm quite all right. I was watching the division—and I thought it was going against us. That was a bit too much—after all we've given for it."

The eyes closed again.

After all we've given! Thus came the reminder that the sacred bond of their comradeship remained unbroken though all else had been taken from them.

Pity for her, pity for himself, welled up and threatened to engulf him. With her strength she had revealed her weakness, and this new fragility was stampeding all the forces of his nature. The stabbing consciousness that, in the eyes of all that was sane, he was her natural protector drove his arms under her shoulders. He was lifting her up to him, her lips were parted, a vein throbbed in her forehead; he could see that the long lashes held tears in their deeply golden softness. . . .

Corbeyne, in a red mist, jerked himself upright.

"Miss Fellowes!" he shouted. Immediately she was in the room. "I think we had better have a doctor, please. No, don't go"—very carefully he laid Sylvia down again—"I think if you'll wait here, I'll send for the doctor myself."

Corbeyne was out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"A PRIOR ENGAGEMENT"

CORBEYNE'S flight was thorough. It took him out of the House into a convenient taxi, and back to his chambers in Victoria Street. From there he rang up the room he had just left, and inquired of Miss Fellowes the doctor's opinion of Mrs. Corbeyne.

"He says it's nothing serious," Miss Fellowes assured him sympathetically. "Just overstrain, and the heat and so on. I have tried to persuade Mrs. Corbeyne to rest a little longer, but she wants to go."

"Will you see her back to Corbeyne House, Miss Fellowes?"

Miss Fellowes hesitated, and her reply—"Certainly, if it is her intention to go there"—would have been a sufficiently strong hint to any other man. Corbeyne, however, with a score of urgent issues clamouring at the gates of his brain, hung up the receiver with a sigh of relief and shouted to Garfield to bring him coffee.

Corbeyne had used coffee as a stimulant for years, and whenever it had been possible Garfield had made it for him. Garfield had studied the art under a Parisian chef, Arab-born and American bred. Corbeyne, between the second and third cup, had been wont to declare that Garfield was assured of immortality.

"Your coffee, sir."

"Good man, Garfield! What's the time?"

“ Just gone eight, sir. Won’t you dine, sir? ”

“ Not yet. Hullo, who’s that at the door? If it’s Lord Carfax—er—I shan’t be in till eleven or so.”

Garfield disappeared and presently Corbeyne heard a woman’s voice answering his. Miss Fellowes, probably.

“ Mrs. Corbeyne, sir.”

Sylvia had advanced well into the middle of the room before Corbeyne had found words.

“ How delightful of you! But you still look very tired. A cup of coffee—Garfield, bring Mrs. Corbeyne a cup of coffee.”

“ Thank you,” said Sylvia. She began to pull off her gloves, leaning back restfully in the chair Corbeyne had given her. “ Yes, I am rather tired. I shall have to go to bed early, I think. I hope I am not interrupting you seriously, but I was afraid I should not see you again this evening and I wanted very much to congratulate you. . . . Thank you, Garfield. It looks most delicious.”

Garfield went out, closing the door softly behind him.

In the shade of the reading-lamp Sylvia and John Corbeyne looked at each other. There was the smell of leather and smoke and coffee all about them, as there had so often been in the dressing-room at Corbeyne House. So often Sylvia had come in in a walking dress and sat just as she was sitting now, pulling off her gloves with quick, sure movements. Presently she would stretch a little and relax more completely in the depths of the chair. . . .

Corbeyne clutched at his vanishing self-control. He said, as steadily as he could :

“ I did not know that you were following the political side of my activities so closely. I am immensely grateful for your interest.”

“ Lord Carfax told me exactly how things were going,” she murmured. “ I was so sorry to hear that you were having so much opposition and difficulty at the start. But you have won through—that is,

you have established my husband's scheme on a firm footing." She stirred her coffee absently.

"It is a matter of time," Corbeyne pointed out. "You probably know that a short time must elapse before my Bill is introduced and a rather longer delay before it becomes law. All this time my opponents will be active. There is one man in particular——"

"Mr. Deagle," interrupted Sylvia. "Lord Carfax told me."

The friendly lamplight, the haze of smoke that lay over the room, the clink of china, were weaving a spell that neither had the strength to break. Sylvia had not challenged him when he had said "my Bill." Corbeyne leaning towards her across the littered writing-table, spoke with the force and enthusiasm with which he would have described his campaign to her two months ago.

"It's extremely fortunate that you have been told how heavily Deagle's opposition weighs. You can understand that if he had a—let us call it a social weapon—against me as well, he would not hesitate to use it. Well, he has that weapon. He knows about my—impersonation."

Sylvia's cup rattled as she replaced it in the saucer. "He knows! Who could have told him?"

"I—am not sure. I intend to find out." He paused a moment, then went on rapidly. "I told you that I intended to run this—conspiracy—in my own way. You were entitled to understand from that that I would not expose you to any un contemplated risk. You are entitled to know also that if I persist with my political programme, Deagle will do his utmost to break me."

She was silent, but through the dusk he could see the gleam of her eyes as they met his.

"You are entitled to know also," he continued, "that it would be extremely easy for me to buy Deagle off—politically speaking. The withdrawal of the support of

the Banks would not ruin the Ministry, for the public would never get to hear about it. We should save our faces for a year or more by tinkering methods."

Still she waited. She had always known instinctively when he had a little more to add and did not know quite how to put it.

"I should have told you at our last interview that the harm a man like Pelt can do to our scheme is only comparative. He can make mischief, but it will take some time for the mischief to become a great flaunting fact that none of us can ignore. It is the same with Deagle. I shall not be able to stave him off as easily as Pelt, but it is quite probable that I can stave him off until my Bill has become law. The moment he shows his hand I'll issue writs against him. I'll make the lawyers cause every possible delay in the hearing of the action for libel. I am bound to lose the action, but I might get the hearing postponed until my work is done. Not done—but well begun, which is the next best thing. It is all a matter of time, you see."

"And then——?"

"Then will come exposure, ruin, disgrace, for you and—your child."

"And yourself."

"That goes without saying."

She brooded a moment.

"You knew this, about Deagle, while you were speaking this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes."

"I don't think I listened very closely to what you were saying," she remarked with an irrelevance that puzzled him for the moment, "but I was *feeling* the way in which you said it, and I could tell from your voice that although you were seeming to reason with them, you were really fighting them, bullying them, begging them. And all the time you knew that very soon they will listen to Mr. Deagle and Mr. Pelt and they will get up and tear you and drive you out."

"It is for you to say whether they will or not," said Corbeyne quietly. "You have but to say the word and I will compromise with Deagle—now—to-night. The Prime Minister himself will endorse my action. And all the clamorous fools in Parliament and out of it will praise my brilliant statesmanship."

Sylvia stirred restlessly.

"You must not compel me to decide," she said, and the emotion in her voice made Corbeyne set his jaw.

"I fear you must. It is you and the child who will be sacrificed, not I."

"It means that you are giving your honour into my keeping," she said. "It is too great a charge."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you must see that I cannot choose for you."

The silence seemed to quiver and sting them. Corbeyne sat motionless. The intimacy of the room grew and grew, mocking them. . . .

"I want you to fight," she told him.

"Ah!"

She rose. He, too, found himself upon his feet. A flash of understanding had come to him. He saw what had brought her to him this evening.

A fortnight ago in the Cardinal Inn she had demanded that they should meet as strangers under the cloak of Carfax's remarkable delusion. She had been consistent beyond his imagination. They were to have the limitations of strangers and the advantages of strangers. They were to take each other on their merits. For her, at least, the Past in its glory and its tragedy had been utterly wiped out. She was offering him the Present to mould as he would.

Even as he fathomed the subtlety of her attitude, she seemed to change it, to elude him yet once more.

"I said once that you were not in the least like my husband. I wish to withdraw that remark. Sometimes you are extremely like—my husband."

Corbeyne gripped the edge of the writing-table behind him. He could have sworn that her eyes held an invitation to ring down the curtain on their grim pantomime. A wild impulse was moving him to beseech her to speak his name and give him back the right to his own personality. He believed she would have responded. He believed. . . .

Ah, but it was beyond his power to entreat Sylvia! To go on his knees as a suppliant to his wife was a price that he must not pay for her—a price that could not be paid because in itself it would blaspheme their love that had been. Their love demanded that he should stand before her proud and virile, ready only to pay homage as he received it. To let the loveliness of her creep into his veins and weaken him—pah! even so might Katherine have been wooed. . . .

“Will you take me back to Corbeyne House,” she was asking. “And—some friends are dining with us. Will you not stay and meet them?”

No, no, he and she must love, if ever they were to love again, upon the high crags with the winds of freedom blustering about. For all their culture, primitive law remained. He must play the man, the ruthless, primitive conqueror whom she must not attempt to wound. The woman must know her man for the stronger.

“I——” he began.

At that moment the telephone bell shrilled an interruption.

“Oh!” gasped Sylvia, startled. And then—“please answer it.”

As he picked up the receiver he saw out of the corner of his eye that she was still standing by the door.

“Hullo?”

“Is that Mr. Corbeyne?” asked the voice of Katherine.

Corbeyne took a deep breath.

“Yes, Corbeyne speaking.”

"I've been expecting you for an hour, John. You surely haven't forgotten that it's to-night you were coming? I don't want us to quarrel about it, but it isn't as though a good deal didn't depend on your keeping your promise to me."

"I'm very busy," cut in Corbeyne desperately. "I have an important business engagement. Surely to-morrow night or the next would suit you as well!"

"Well, really, John, considering everything, it's very strange of you to take that tone when you think of how very frank we've been with each other. I don't want to go into it all again now, but——"

"Very well," said Corbeyne. "I will come."

He hung up the receiver with elaborate care. He tried to force himself to look at Sylvia, but he could not do it.

"I am extremely sorry," he said, "but I shall not be able to accept your invitation for this evening. I have a prior engagement."

He heard the whisper of her skirts as she turned, the sharp sound of her hand upon the door. When he looked up she had left him.

He picked up his hat and set out for the flat in Red Lion Square.

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When Mr. Pelt had left Corbeyne House, outraged and revengeful, his footsteps had turned straight in the direction of the offices of *The Plain Man*. At the end of a few minutes his footsteps faltered; he had remembered that bit about the affidavit. He was determined not to funk it this time, but on the whole it might be well to consult Osbert first. Osbert was a colleague at Catlett's who, in years past, had all but completed his articles to a solicitor.

From Osbert on the following day Mr. Pelt had learned that although you were all right in signing an affidavit if you were telling the truth, it was as well to

be in a position to prove that you were telling the truth, in case of accidents, as it were. That, Mr. Pelt realised, was his weak point. Of course, he could bring half a dozen persons from Ealing to identify John Corbeyne as Brierly, but experience had taught that it was no easy matter to effect a confrontation between people like his mother and Mrs. Tuckey on the one hand and a Cabinet Minister on the other. There were those infernal forms to fill up, and if Corbeyne chose to deny the whole thing there might be trouble—big trouble.

That night Mr. Pelt encouraged his mother to talk about the Brierlys. It was a task that presented no difficulty whatever. In due course he elicited that Mrs. Brierly had left the maisonnette not even in an ordinary taxi, if you please, but in a car hired from Richardsons with her luggage on top.

In twenty-four hours, by the exercise of much trouble and ingenuity, Pelt discovered which of the dozen odd drivers employed by the garage had driven Mrs. Brierly. When he eventually faced his man and requested to know the address to which Mrs. Brierly had been driven, he was met with the blunt query:

“What d’you want to know for?”

Clearly it was no moment for economy. Mr. Pelt produced a pound note, and held it between thumb and forefinger.

“Reasons,” he said darkly.

“St. George’s Mansions, Red Lion Square,” said the man, and took the pound note.

Mr. Pelt concocted a tale for his mother’s consumption, and thereafter, at the end of his official day, had a brief snack in Town and took up his stand outside St. George’s Mansions. On the second night of his vigil he was rewarded by seeing Katherine come out. But it was not until two days later that he saw John Corbeyne himself drive up in a taxi and enter the block.

“He may be a Cabinet Minister—but he won’t care to shout it out too loud in this neighbourhood,” Mr.

Pelt told himself. "Give him time to get into his slippers."

Mr. Pelt allowed a liberal margin for the process of donning slippers. He allowed, in fact, half an hour. Then he entered the block and knocked at the porter's quarters.

"What number is Mrs. Brierly's?" he asked. "She told me the mansions, but didn't say the number."

"Forty-seven," replied the porter.

Mr. Pelt began a leisurely ascent of the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PERPETUAL HONEYMOON

CORBEYNE'S taxi arrived with disconcerting quickness at Red Lion Square. He dismissed it, and began to look for the number. There was no difficulty in finding it. He knocked. At once a light sprang up behind the glass panels of the door. Katherine's figure stood out in silhouette as she pulled back the catch. . . .

"Here you are then, John."

"Yes, here I am. How have you been getting on?"

She lifted her face to his. Involuntarily Corbeyne looked over her shoulder into the hall. The little flat was very quiet. Corbeyne bent and kissed her cheek, and was conscious that she had offered him her lips.

"Come in and let me show you everything, such as it is, though if you'd seen this place a fortnight ago you wouldn't *believe* it could be the same——"

To the accompaniment of her voice Corbeyne inspected the flat. How quiet it was! Isolation closed down upon his mind; through it as through a mist he noted that the tiny place was obtrusively comfortable. It reminded him of a "model" home he had seen once at an exhibition. There was leather in the dining-room, chintz in the bedroom, velvet in the drawing-room; and all the cushions and silver boxes had been brought from Ealing.

"I chose *everything* myself, John. . . ."

Corbeyne wondered idly whether the process had been a lengthy one. That lamp, for instance, he had surely seen dozens exactly like it in shop-windows. Why hadn't she just ordered a furnishing company to decorate and equip her flat? The result would have been the same. Probably that was what, in effect, had happened. She had thought she was choosing, and all the time she was taking what the shop-assistants told her she wanted. She lumbered through life like that, proclaiming shrilly her right to go where she would, the while her feeble impulses drove her without pity or understanding. . . .

"Really I was so nervous as to what could have happened to you, knowing you couldn't have *forgotten*, that I felt I simply must ring you up, I was in such a state. I've got a girl, John, that's lucky, isn't it?—daily, you know, she goes at seven, but she's left everything ready, so I've only to dish it up, and I'm sure you must be fainting for something to eat."

She was leading him into the box-like kitchen, her hand pressing his. Corbeyne said vaguely:

"I was held up on the way here by an unemployed procession." Strange how one managed to run a national tragedy as a useful line of small-talk in Katherine's presence. She was busy at the gas-oven, but apparently she thought he expected a lively interest in his movements.

"Too bad! Were you really? They've been quite near here. I wonder what the police are doing. Fancy your being delayed by a nuisance like that, it does seem a shame, and the police don't do anything, do they?"

Corbeyne said he did not know. He was wondering how many people like Katherine could bring themselves to believe that bludgeoning a man and locking him up was a sound way of enabling his bankrupt employer to sell goods in a vanished market. But then, probably,

she no more believed it than she disbelieved it. Her mind contemplated the wrong angle of the wrong thing and acted upon the misjudgment, or forgot. . . .

"It's a sweet little place, isn't it, John?"

"Yes. Yes, very cosy. It's very hot in here, Katherine. May I open a window?"

The rush of air brought a momentary relief. The sense of being shut in was lifted. From the other flats came sounds of talk and laughter and somewhere a gramophone played a song of popular charm. Katherine sang a bar or so, glancing at him—

"Can't I help you with that tray, Katherine?"

"Kath-er-inel!" She was pouting at him, her face against his shoulder. "Oh, you are a stiff old thing! Say Kathie, like you used to!"

"Give me the tray—Kathie."

She gave it him, laughing youthfully. The pink overall she had donned suited her better than the too vivid silk underneath. He wished she would keep it on, but she did not. She made him unfasten it and draw it off and admire her frock and the new way in which she had done her hair.

"Not that it *is* new, of course, it's the way I had it when we were on our honeymoon—lucky I didn't shingle, and you said it looked like a coronet. . . . Oh, well, come and let's have supper and afterwards we can just be cosy together like we used to when——"

"Did you have much difficulty in furnishing this flat?" cut in Corbeyne desperately.

"Well, I did and I didn't—let's see, did I tell you about the man who came to put the furniture back at Ealing? They do make such a fuss you know—the landlords—if things aren't where they ought to be that you daren't leave as much as a chair out of place."

She told him all about the man who came to put the furniture back. Corbeyne had never before had such

masses of information hurled at him. He had the impression that she must have accumulated a great deal of property at Ealing when he had imagined that everything in a furnished maisonnette belonged to the landlord. The collection of their miscellaneous items of property—he gathered they were his also—was a catalogue in the form of an epic. There were dangerous moments, acute crises, dramatic thrills (“So what do you think I did then?”) His attention wandered and he caught sight of the clock. Surely he had been with her more than half an hour! It seemed a day—a month. It had been a month before. . . .

“John, you’re not eating anything!” She jumped up, fidgeting round him. “To please me, now—to please Kathie, have some. . . . Whoever’s that?”

A sharp knock had fallen on the door.

“A friend of yours?” suggested Corbeyne. He spoke very quietly but a pulse was hammering in his brain. He had walked into a trap—she had fooled him again—she—

“I haven’t any friends here, there’s not a soul knows where I am,” she protested. “I can’t think who it can be.”

He looked at her searchingly; she seemed to be speaking the truth. After all, it might only be the porter, or a visitor who had mistaken the number.

The knock was repeated.

“I suppose I’d better see who it is.” Katherine moved dubiously towards the door. Corbeyne forestalled her. He believed now that her discomfiture was as great as his own.

“No, you stay here.”

He squared his shoulders and turned on the light. He swung open the door and faced Mr. Robert Pelt.

“Ah!” said Corbeyne. He felt little or no surprise. Behind him he heard a gasp and a rustle. Katherine

had followed him to the threshold of the dining-room.

"Evening," said Mr. Pelt loudly. "Evening, Mr. Corbeyne. Evening, Mrs. Brierly."

"Good evening," returned Corbeyne equably, and heard a door slam behind him. Katherine had fled. So much the better. "Won't you come in?" invited Corbeyne.

"Not if Mrs. Brierly doesn't wish to welcome me," replied Mr. Pelt with elaborate stiffness, and added rather lamely: "Thanks all the same."

Corbeyne knew that he must get the fellow into the flat somehow and learn what precisely was in the wind.

"Oh, come Mr. Pelt, what is the use of our pretending to each other," he said disparagingly. "You know perfectly well that this is my flat and not Mrs. Brierly's, and I invite you to come in and have a chat."

The stiffness crumpled. Whatever else John Corbeyne might be he was indubitably a Cabinet Minister. And it was something to have a Cabinet Minister ask you to come in in that tone of voice. Pelt came in.

Corbeyne took him into a narrow slit of a room which Katherine had told him was his "den." The "den" idea doubtless centred round some half-a-dozen rather elaborate devices for catching cigarette ash and a tantalus that was supposed to represent the front of a Greek Temple. Corbeyne indicated and armchair, just big enough for two, as Katherine had pointed out. Mr. Pelt crouched on the edge of it.

"Have a cigarette?"

"No, I'll not smoke now, thanks."

"Well, a whisky?" Corbeyne glanced doubtfully at the tantalus.

"I never touch spirits, thanks."

Corbeyne lit a cigarette and waited.

"Well?"

Corbeyne could see that Mr. Pelt was stiffening himself, whipping himself into action. He stood by for a prepared speech.

"I've no doubt you've got your own opinion about me prying into your affairs, as I've no doubt you call it, Mr. Corbeyne," began Pelt. "And I've no doubt you intend to use all the forces at your disposal to prevent my being a nuisance to you."

Corbeyne waited and gathered from the silence that followed that it was his turn.

"Why, exactly, do you want to be a nuisance to me, Mr. Pelt?" he asked.

"Can't we keep personalities out of it, Mr. Corbeyne?" countered Pelt, and Corbeyne again perceived the rehearsed speech. He supposed Mr. Pelt was waiting for an answer. Exactly how they were going to discuss an intimately personal question without personalities was rather difficult to see.

"Oh, by all means," said Corbeyne. "Quite impersonally I gather that you, having tumbled upon my—er—little secret, intend to make it public property, thereby driving me out of political life."

"No one would be sorrier than myself, personally," said Mr. Pelt. "But I think as a patriotic Englishman you'll agree with me, Mr. Corbeyne, that—it behoves those who sit in high places to set the good example of a spotless life. England is entitled to demand the highest moral standard from her public men."

"I quite agree with you in principle," said Corbeyne. "From patriotic motives, then, you are going to precipitate a scandal—you are going to advertise to the Continent and the world at large that one of the English Ministers of the Crown is a—er—loose-liver. You sincerely believe that by doing so you will be performing a service to your country?"

Corbeyne had the impression that Pelt was giving serious consideration to his words.

"If a man breaks the moral law, you can never tell what he'll do, can you," asked Mr. Pelt.

Corbeyne found the question unanswerable. Mr. Pelt, he could see, was again warming himself up.

"You may or may not know it, Mr. Corbeyne, but I was amongst the deputation that waited on you the other day—from the Wool Combine."

There was in the voice a note of accusation that puzzled Corbeyne. He nodded non-committally.

"There you are, you see," said Mr. Pelt. He breathed heavily and again waited.

Corbeyne wrestled with the problem, and then saw light.

"You consider that my refusal to concede to the demands of the deputation was as—er—immoral as my—er—present mode of life?" he asked. It was just conceivable that Mr. Pelt might mean that. Mr. Pelt did.

"A straw shows which way the wind blows," said Mr. Pelt. "*There* was a measure that the country was crying out for. Mr. Catlett told you all that it meant to our industry—I took a note of every word he said. And what was your answer?"

That, Corbeyne supposed, was a merely rhetorical question. Mr. Pelt did not actually require him to repeat his answer. He was meant to deduce his own fundamental immorality.

He bit back a sarcastic rejoinder. Pelt, he reasoned, was quite ignorant enough to have swallowed all the cant of the Wool Combine and to believe it true.

"You, no doubt, had your reasons for what you said to the deputation—same as you have your reasons for leading the life—you're—er—leading," continued Mr. Pelt. "All I can say is—without being personal—I can't have any confidence that the one set of reasons is any better than the other."

Corbeyne wondered whether Pelt would have the courage to utter the thought that had most clearly come into his brain. Mr. Pelt had.

"Not but what I wouldn't be ready enough to change my views if you were to change yours," continued Pelt. "You must have known while Mr. Catlett was talking that he was speaking the truth——"

Corbeyne's disgust drove him into a taunt he knew to be vain.

"When you came to see my wife the other afternoon—from patriotic motives, Mr. Pelt—she insulted you by assuming that you had come to blackmail her. Do you realise that you are actually blackmailing me? In effect, you are offering to suppress your knowledge if I will abuse my position by bringing in a Bill which I believe to be a bad one."

"I never promised nothing—anything," said Mr. Pelt indignantly. His indignation gave Corbeyne back his self-control.

"There is no need for us to get angry with each other," he said wearily. "We had much better come to an understanding. I refuse flatly to submit to what I call blackmail, and you call patriotism. I shall continue to oppose the Wool Combine. You, I gather, will, as a mark of your disapproval, make my affairs public. I wonder if you'll find it worth while? It will take you some time, you know, and meanwhile my opposition will be continued. The Press won't be inclined to help you."

"*The Plain Man* is," said Mr. Pelt aggressively. "The editor is ready enough to take it up as soon as I sign an affidavit."

So he had sought a market already, the little beast! *The Plain Man*—an affidavit——

"Then why not sign it, instead of wasting time here?" snapped Corbeyne.

"Because I hadn't got the proof," said Pelt rising. He was majestic, righteously assured. "But I have

now. I gave you a chance to set yourself right, and you haven't taken it. I wish you a very good night, Mr. Corbeyne."

He spoke from the doorway. Corbeyne did not pursue him. A moment later he heard the outer door of the flat slam.

Corbeyne shrugged his shoulders. The interview had gone in its essentials very much as he had expected. The only surprise had been that Pelt seemed to be moved by genuine conviction and not by the hope of personal gain. Poor, tangle-brained little devil! To run the Combine graft as a burning moral principle!

"John!"

Corbeyne faced Katherine. He had expected speculation, alarm, a flood of futile questions—tears, perhaps. He met a hysterical and sordid resentment.

"You could have seen to it that he kept his mouth shut, and you threw away the chance, oh yes, you did. I heard every word, I was in the bedroom." The admission caused her no twinge of embarrassment. "He said as plain as plain that you could square it with him, and you refused, you wouldn't be bothered to go an inch out of your way to prevent me being a byword in Ealing with all those Tuckeys and Pelts clacking their heads off——"

"But, Katherine, we discussed the probability of this very thing happening. You yourself warned me that Pelt must be avoided; well, he's found out. It's unlucky, certainly, but mainly for me, for my work. You told me that as regards yourself you were indifferent to scandal provided we——"

"You and your work," she shrilled, her face white with anger, "you and your work don't matter to me! I said at first that you were to be Mr. Brierly and put me right at Ealing."

"I did do so."

"——and that you'd have to take care Mr. Pelt didn't find out Brierly and John Corbeyne were one and

the same, especially if you went up to Town to put your affairs in order. Then you told me you'd got a job as John Corbeyne, and I realised that what had really happened was that you were backing out, and so I said I'd reopen the case by giving Shrager away, only you persuaded me not to——"

"My dear Katherine, your memory is not serving you well. I told you that I had come to the stage where nothing matters except the work, and that if you felt I had, therefore, broken my bargain with you, you must go ahead and punish me for it."

She struck her hands wildly together.

"Oh yes, I know all that, but you listened all right when I said if I could leave Ealing as respectably as I'd lived there, I wouldn't mind starting a new life with you, even if it was under suspicion of being—being your mistress, when the whole world ought to know I'm your wife. You were to come to me here whenever you could and I was to keep quiet about the mistake in the divorce, as I have——"

"And I have come here to this flat, as I promised I would. What have we to reproach each other with?"

"You're fooling me," she flung at him, "You're twisting about with words and pretending I haven't been let down when I have. Isn't it wasted, all that time we spent at Ealing, now that Mr. Pelt has found out?—I shouldn't be surprised if he hadn't told them all about us already! All those weeks when I was showing them I was as good and better than they, all gone for nothing, worse than nothing, because they'll think worse of me than they ever did when I was alone, and when all's said and done I *am* your wife, I am, I am! It's her—it's Sylvia—who's your——"

Corbeyne's grip on her shoulder choked the word into silence on her lips. He swung her roughly round and tumbled her into the chair in which Mr. Pelt had sat and moralised. She was weeping now, or pretend-

ing to weep; she had subsided into her old pose of terror. Through her gasps she begged him not to hit her again, and warned him that this time he had injured her fatally. All she wanted, she babbled, was to be left to die quietly, spurned and misjudged.

Corbeyne ignored the pose. He had expected it—and it was not new. His thoughts were busy with her grievance. He loathed her, but for once he saw her point of view. She had meant to keep the Ealing period untouched, to possess it, in memory, as an unsullied phase of complete *bourgeois* content. She had been reinstated in the eyes of those who had sneered and whispered; she had wrung apologies and atonements from them. That streak in her that craved for the approval of petty neighbours had been satisfied at last. She had stored up her satisfaction as an abiding balm. It had gone with her to what she called her “new life.”

Probably she had had a fantastic conception of this altered state of affairs. Instead of the neighbours and a husband's hat in the hall, there would be black and gold divans, champagne on ice, intrigues and gilded secrecy. The wanton in her had clutched it all, greedily. She had read of such things, seen them on the films, and she had fancied herself whisked into the very heart of daring—herself, perhaps, the lure of London, the centre of the bubbling, glittering life that runs beside and behind the world of virtuous give and take.

And now, before the mysterious portals had properly opened, the re-instatement at Ealing had been wiped out. The jar of ointment had been smashed. She had been “let down.”

“I should have warned you that you can't ever step from one life into another,” said Corbeyne quietly. “Things overlap—it's inevitable. I'm sorry that you've lost Ealing's good opinion again, since you valued it so much.”

"I should get it back if I reopened the case," she raved. She had cast aside again her cloak of panic. "*Everyone'd* understand then what I'd been through; and I wouldn't have to fight all alone for my good name, let me tell you. I've got friends that'd help me——"

"I don't doubt it. Where did you first meet Deagle, Katherine?"

He had startled her into speechlessness. Her face was like chalk when she managed to frame her questions.

"How d'you know? How long have you known? Where——"

"It doesn't matter. I do know, and I don't underestimate your—ally's—strength. But I think you are mistaken when you call him your friend. For instance, I don't doubt that he will come to see me before you reopen the case. He, too, will have his price. Do you realise that? Your plight is nothing to him as such. He'll use you——"

"Oh yes, you can run him down," she countered viciously, "you can try and trick me into taking you back again."

Corbeyne laughed in spite of himself. Then he sobered. He was only sorry for her, the poor, puzzled fool—when she was angry.

"I just wanted to warn you, Katherine. I was not trying to trick you into anything. You see, to a point, you can't do me as much harm now as you could. Pelt's story will be used against me politically; in time—since I've nothing to fight it with—it will destroy me politically. You, with your story, your reopened case, can't do more than that even with Deagle to back you. The only way in which your weapon scores over Pelt's is that it wounds Sylvia and the child as well."

"You take that calmly enough now, though two months ago at the Parnassus you were ready to do

anything I said so long as they didn't get talked about."

"I've tried before to make you understand that my views have changed since then. As it stands now I'll go on paying for their safety the price I am paying—that is, my separation from them and my enforced association with you——"

"Oh, you do say such things, such cruel things."

"——but I won't pay the further price of abusing my position as Cabinet Minister. I'll put it more brutally still, Katherine, that you may fully understand it. The choice is in your hands, not mine. If you will leave this country and maintain your silence as to the divorce tangle, I will join you when my political activities have been brought to a close by Pelt and *The Plain Man*. That should be in three months or so. Ealing, meanwhile, will have torn your good name to shreds. On the other hand, if you value your reputation more than—my company, you will reopen the case. You may not win it, but the prosecution of Shrager for perjury will reinstate you with Mrs. Tuckey, I'm sure. More sinned against than sinning, and so on. Ealing will like that."

She was deaf to the sarcasm, but the brutality had had its effect. She was stripped at last of that amazing vanity that had believed it possible to infatuate him again, that had spoken, sincerely, of "taking him back."

"You mean I've got to be the talk of people like those Pelts and go messing about abroad, with you tied to me against your will—or else put myself right in the Courts and do without you!"

"Yes. That was your problem from the first, Katherine. You must always have realised that it was against my will to be with you. I made no secret of it. I did it for the sake of the child and Sylvia."

"You made me think you were getting to love me again, you did, you brute! You acted as though you'd

forgotten them, you came here so that it should be like old times——”

“For their sakes.”

“Oh, I hate you! I wish I could kill you!” The colossal vanity was killed at last; the biting death of it shrieked in her voice, quivered in her crooked fingers. “Go on, get out! Get out, d’you hear? And you dare to despise a man like Mr. Deagle! You just wait, he’ll see me through, he’ll tell me where to go and what to do to get my rights——”

Corbeyne was in the hall. The hoarse voice followed him, rent with fury. He seized his hat and slammed the door of the flat behind him. Instantly the hoarse voice was muted. Corbeyne ran down the stairs and out into the road.

He breathed deeply. He felt curiously free. Pelt, Katherine were no longer to be coerced or bribed. They had each struck or would strike within the hour. then it would be a matter of time. At the beginning, foreseeing the chance of all this with an accuracy that now gratified him, he had reckoned on three months. Three months before either of them, with Deagle to help, could finally drag him down. In three months his Bill would be Law.

He paused as a familiar thought came to him. Katherine and Deagle could do nothing without Shrager. Rason, so far, had failed to find the man. Let Katherine and Deagle do it for him. One man to shadow Deagle, another Katherine, with the independent searcher still at work—it would be surprising if from such a widely flung net the fish could still escape.

On an impulse he hailed a taxi and went to Rason’s office. By good luck the detective was still there.

Corbeyne stated his wishes.

“Right, Mr. Corbeyne. Do you want to know also whether Mr. Deagle and Mrs. Brierly meet, irrespective of their possible dealings with Shrager?”

"Yes. Mrs. Brierly will probably receive Mr. Deagle at her flat. If she rings him up, the number she will give is Chancery 7124."

"Right," repeated Rason, making notes.

Corbeyne left the office. The feeling of freedom was intensified. The fight proper had begun.

CHAPTER XXX

COLD PRINT

THE period immediately following Corbeyne's speech in the House was a critical one for the new Ministry and for the Government itself.

At first the Government Press and the few influential City organs supported the scheme with enthusiasm, while the opposition papers subjected it to close criticism. At the end of the week some of the expert criticism was creeping into the papers that supported the Government on most issues.

If there were no logical flaws in the scheme there were at any rate a great many difficulties. Chief of these was the attitude of other countries. This point was being worked up to a dangerous extent when opposition was temporarily silenced by cordial communications from France and Italy, who both announced their intention of sending immediate deputations to Corbeyne with a view to arranging their participation.

The Foreign Delegations arrived on the Monday, and the work involved employed Corbeyne virtually day and night until Thursday. More genuine difficulties had cropped up. Nothing was settled except that Corbeyne would attend another conference in Paris after the Second Reading of his Bill.

During that time no communication came from either Pelt or Katherine. Deagle made no personal

move. Rason reported that Mrs. Brierly had shopped a lot and posted one letter to someone in London, and received next day what might have been an answer. Corbeyne grunted and put Katherine, Pelt, Deagle and Rason violently out of his mind.

It was after his last meeting with the Deputation at the Ministry, when he returned to his chambers, that Miss Fellowes handed him a marked copy of *The Plain Man*.

What's in a name? N'other words, who, outside these offices, would guess that Ealing, the staid and respectable, will shortly find its name in the papers as the locale of a very nasty little domestic scandal involving one of the highest in the land and a Woman of No Importance? Seriously, this sort of thing has got to stop. We've seen enough of petticoat government. Next week we shall make a startling disclosure which will cause a rare fluttering in the Parliamentary dovecote."

Corbeyne made a grimace. He had anticipated everything except the diction of *The Plain Man*. A second paragraph was marked immediately under the first.

"John Corbeyne, the new Minister of Credit, is a man of many diversions and interests. Is particularly sorry for the lower middle-classes whose social customs he has recently been studying at close quarters."

Corbeyne had never before actually read *The Plain Man*, though in common with the rest of humanity he had heard about it. Mainly he was puzzled. The sequence of the paragraphs would, he supposed, convey to nine readers out of ten the intimation that he himself was the man referred to in the first paragraph. But why do it in that roundabout way? Pelt had had to sign an affidavit, so why not have a poster about it and blazon Pelt's facts over the front sheet? Why not

make the startling announcement right away instead of merely promising it next week?

The paper was apparently published on Thursday. The disclosure, then, would be made next Thursday—the day fixed for the Second Reading of the Bill—the most important stage of the passage of the Bill, at which he would have to make a speech.

That was unfortunate, to say the least of it. Doubtless the Editor would see to it that copies of the paper were handed round the House while the speech was in progress.

“How did you get hold of this thing, Miss Fellowes?” he asked.

“By post from the publishers,” said Miss Fellowes; she gave him a straight, cool glance as she added: “The markings are theirs.”

That, Corbeyne supposed, was the “manly” touch. Never say a thing behind a man’s back! Send him a copy of the paper to make sure that he’ll squirm.

Well, the obvious retort was a libel action. It would not stop the appearance of the next instalment of the scandal, but it would satisfy people, and it would stave things off. The case would not come on for weeks and he could invent further delays. . . . He rang up Bayliss at his office and learnt that he had left. He could ring Bayliss up at his home address later on.

“Wonder what Sylvia will think about it!” ran his thoughts. He hoped she would not see it. The vernacular would nauseate her. It would be sufficient for her to be told the mere fact. There was no dodging that in any case. If he did not tell her someone else would. Besides, it was her right to know. She was a partner in his career, she had shared the labour of his service and would share the disgrace of his downfall. He left his chambers for Corbeyne House.

They had established the routine that when he wished to speak to her he would go to the study and ring her on the house telephone. It was a little after

six when he arrived and he hoped to catch her in that restful hour before she dressed for dinner.

When he entered the study it was already half lighted by a shaded reading lamp. He bristled at that. Sylvia had evidently been using the room—although she had promised him it should be exclusively reserved for himself. The agreement, the lines of which Sylvia had herself laid down, must be kept with the utmost strictness.

He stopped short in the act of throwing off his coat. In the armchair by the hearth lay the Jobber asleep.

It was nearly two months since he had seen the Jobber or heard his voice.

The Jobber's head was on the arm of the chair, his feet curled up under him. A bruise and a couple of scratches adorned his bare knees and his hands, relaxed in sleep, showed signs of a pre-occupation with the coal in the grate. Corbeyne remembered that the Jobber had never been able to resist reconstructing the fires laid in readiness for a chilly evening.

His hair was getting darker, or was it the shadow? And hadn't his nose grown a little? It was still a ridiculous, babyish button of a nose, but the bridge was slightly more prominent. A jolly kid; a topping kid. . . . And he was evidently all right again. He looked splendid. . . .

Corbeyne felt a wave of personal emotion surge up within him. Lord, how he longed for the splendid, obvious sanity of a romp with the Jobber! The Jobber could not possibly understand Deagle or Pelt or Katherine. . . . The Jobber gave a vital, romping lie to the preposterous pretence that he and Sylvia had never been lovers. The Jobber——

Corbeyne had stopped in the act of taking off his overcoat. The overcoat hung from his shoulders. By an odd trick of the brain he slipped the overcoat back into his proper position.

That reading lamp! The Jobber had not turned it on. The Jobber had not drawn the curtains. The Jobber, in fact, was no more than a super in a neat little scene entitled, "The Softening of John Corbeyne."

Corbeyne picked up the receiver of the house telephone, pressed a lever and a moment later heard Sylvia answer.

"Good evening," he said. "You will excuse my mentioning it, but your child is in my room. He is asleep. Perhaps you will be good enough to send your nurse to remove him. . . . Please don't apologise. It's a trifle. By the way, I should be glad if you could spare me a few minutes on a business matter."

He had planned to be occupied with his papers when the nurse came in. The plan miscarried through the fact that Sylvia came in with the nurse. He rose and looked conventionally embarrassed, wondering exactly what would happen if the Jobber were to awake and hail him. But the Jobber did not awake.

Corbeyne closed the door after the nurse.

Sylvia seated herself. She was quite calm, quite remote. Her polite, attentive smile told him that she knew he knew the Jobber had been intentionally allowed to sleep in the room, but that it did not matter. Corbeyne put everything from him but *The Plain Man*. He plunged.

"The—er—blow, as I believe it's called on these occasions, has fallen rather sooner than we expected," he began. "That fellow Pelt has apparently been to *The Plain Man* and told his story. There are a couple of paragraphs in the issue published to-day. They are in the form of an innuendo, but my name is dragged in on a very thin pretence that will deceive no one. The paper promises to be definite next week. I—I thought I'd better warn you."

"I've seen *The Plain Man*," she told him.

"How damnable! I had hoped it would be unnecessary for you actually to see it."

Sylvia smiled with her lips. Her eyes looked at the house telephone.

"I'm afraid you must believe that I'm a sensitive woman. I assure you it is quite a mistake. Even *The Plain Man* does not shock me in the very least. They have made, of course, the inevitable mistake of assuming—an ordinary intrigue."

"I am not quite sure what is the best course to take," said Corbeyne. "I tried to get on to my solicitor to-night, but he'd left. I can speak to him later at his private address. It might just be possible for us to ignore it. It all depends on what they're going to say next week."

"How did you get to hear about it?" she asked.

"They sent me a copy, apparently."

"They sent me one, too," said Sylvia.

"It would be a pleasure," said Corbeyne grimly, "to assault that Editor."

"I'm afraid you haven't time for knight errantry," she said. "Also, it's rather obviously just what he wants you to do. I think he counted on your going round there to assault him, and on my going round there to buy off the disclosures in next week's issue."

"H'm! I don't think that's his game——"

"It wasn't," said Sylvia. Corbeyne stared at her. "I was there this afternoon talking to him. I think I went with the half-formed intention of buying the paper outright." As Corbeyne gasped she added:

"My husband left me in control of very nearly a quarter of a million, you know."

"And you think he would have approved of your spending it in such a manner!"

"Really, the degree of my regard for my husband's approval is so small as to be negligible," said Sylvia with what Corbeyne regarded as the detestable drawl she had cultivated during the last few weeks. "However, *The Plain Man* is not for sale unfortunately. The Editor told me so quite regretfully. I drew him

out and he told me that that objectionable little man Pelt had signed an affidavit. I offered fifty thousand pounds in cash for that affidavit."

"What did he say?"

"He said nothing at first. He tore his blotting pad in half. Then he very nearly cried. I have never seen a man so broken with exasperation. There were real tears in his eyes when he assured me that he wished he could sell me the affidavit. I rather gathered that it was the great chance of his life, but he was compelled to let it slip through his fingers. I was so moved that I offered him a compromise. A thousand pounds a week for him personally for every week in which no further mention was made of your name. His eye brightened, he said he would see what he could do. He's going to send me a code message to-morrow—apparently they start printing the next week's issue then—in which I am to understand whether he can—I think he said 'deal' with me or not. He's a resourceful man, I should say, and I'm quite certain he'll do everything in his power to earn that thousand."

Corbeyne gritted his teeth. It jarred every nerve in his body to hear Sylvia speak with alert competence of the details of blackmail and bribery.

"A thousand pounds a week! It's a pretty stiff fee," was all he could say at that moment.

"But surely—time is everything to us, is it not?"

Corbeyne was bound to admit that it was. Good comradeship demanded that he should congratulate her on her clever handling of the situation.

"Really, I—I must express my thanks for your activity in the matter. It was most generous of you——"

"Chivalrous again, Mr. Brierly! It was not generosity—it was merely intelligent selfishness. My husband was an honourable man—in politics. When my child grows up and asks me about his father, I want to be able to tell him—just that. You see, there will

be nothing else that I can tell him about his father. The Second Reading of the Bill is for next Thursday, isn't it?"

"Yes. Then its fate will be decided," said Corbeyne. "I can fix the French—and the Italians."

"I'm glad," said Sylvia. "I'll let you know the result of the Editor's message to-morrow." She spoke from the doorway.

"Thanks," said Corbeyne. "In the meantime I'll get on to my solicitor."

The door closed.

"It's the only thing I can tell him about his father."

He was fidgeting with the flat of a ruler. It balanced on his finger like the beam of a scale. Sylvia, the Jobber and himself—Katherine. His hand closed on the ruler as a hand might close on the hilt of a dagger.

"Melodramatic idiot!" he cursed himself, and then rang up Bayliss, the solicitor.

CHAPTER XXXI

FACE TO FACE

BAYLISS advised immediate action in the form of an issue of a writ for libel and an application for an injunction to restrain publication of *The Plain Man*.

But then Bayliss was ignorant of the facts. Officially at any rate, Bayliss was amongst those who believed that Corbeyne had recently undergone an operation for appendicitis. In talking of the injunction he was assuming that he would be armed with Corbeyne's sworn statement that the libel was untrue. Corbeyne nodded at mention of the writ, but frowned over the sworn statement.

"Well, look here, old man," he said in conclusion. "Get all the guns ready, but don't let any of them off until I give the word. I don't want to play into their hands and give them gratuitous advertisement. I know the thing has a big circulation, but I'm not at all sure that it counts for anything. It might be possible to ignore the matter."

Bayliss agreed that it might be possible, but for himself rather doubted it. Corbeyne was not in a position to explain that in view of Sylvia's private arrangement he had no wish to force the hand of *The Plain Man*. Also, he shrank from stating to Bayliss, without explanation, that there was no earthly chance of obtaining either an apology or damages

from *The Plain Man*—that his one object was to keep the scandal manageable until his Bill should have passed into Law.

Wheels within senseless wheels! One version of the thing for one person and another for another! His life had been a mass of wheels and versions ever since that fateful afternoon in the Parnassus. In this latest complication there hovered the same sense of unreality, the same shirking of the issues in discussing the matter with anyone. Carfax would be in soon, no doubt, and then there would have to be another angle of approach—with the impersonation theme dominant.

Katherine, by now, had doubtless joined forces with Deagle. Corbeyne rehearsed once again their probable course of action. Katherine would tell her ally that she was going to re-open the case after all. She would see Deagle's solicitors, or her own. They would demand the evidence of the detective Shrager.

Shrager! Everything ultimately revolved upon the whereabouts of that one man. What an age Rason took to find Shrager! Days—it was all a matter of days. If he were still in possession of his fortune, he reasoned grimly, it would have been worth half of it to know at that moment where he could find the man Shrager. Katherine had said that he was "lying low." Did that mean that she knew where he was to be found? It was unlikely, Corbeyne thought. It was the kind of thing she would say to cover her ignorance. It was more likely that Deagle knew. Shrager was now the chief factor in his campaign.

Corbeyne was to find on the following morning that there was another factor he had more or less overlooked. The Prime Minister!

He saw the Prime Minister at the latter's invitation during the afternoon. On the desk was an open marked copy of *The Plain Man*. The Prime Minister was tapping it with an ivory ruler, grimacing at it.

The grimace told Corbeyne that the cheery *bonhomie* phase was uppermost.

"Queer style of writing!" said the Prime Minister. "Rather effective! Makes them snigger."

"I've seen my solicitor about it of course, sir," said Corbeyne. "He was on the war-path and I've told him to have a writ for libel ready. I thought of ignoring the paragraph this week—see what they dish up next Thursday."

"The Second Reading is down for next Thursday," said the Premier reflectively. "If this Editor keeps his word to his readers they'll be sniggering very hard next Thursday. . . . Remember the Motion. A bare majority. First Reading—very little better. There's a great deal too much opposition to this Bill, my boy. We can't afford to run a risk of this nature—" again the ivory ruler came into play upon the Editorial page of *The Plain Man*.

"Very well, sir," said Corbeyne. "Since those are your views I will commence an immediate action for libel."

"Good man!" said the Premier, but there was a qualifying note in his voice which told Corbeyne more was coming. "But an action will hardly see you through. If that paper comes out next Thursday with anything but an unconditional apology the Reading of the Bill will have to be postponed."

Corbeyne caught his breath. He had reckoned on three months before any of them could block him effectively. Three months—and it had dwindled down to—how many days?

"There's no need for alarm," said the Prime Minister suavely. "Your man can see the Editor or whoever's responsible, demand the unconditional apology, and if it's refused, all you have to do is to go before a judge—you'll have to go personally—swear that the matter is false and apply for an injunction to restrain publication of the paper. You'll get the injunction all right."

Corbeyne said nothing. Perjury—or the Second Reading would have to be postponed. Perjury or—He managed a platitude or two and withdrew.

As he left the official residence a car was drawing up. Out of the car stepped Blenkiron, the big voice of the Banking Trust.

"Hullo, Corbeyne! Just a minute."

For just a minute they strolled a few yards together.

"That paragraph in that gutter rag," said Blenkiron.

"Don't take any notice of it, it's a political dodge."

"I shall have to," said Corbeyne. "The Premier insists."

"The devil!" said Blenkiron. "Any truth in it, boy?"

"I don't keep a mistress at Ealing—or anywhere else, if that is what you mean," answered Corbeyne. A literal truth, it was dangerously near to a lie, like most literal truths. In the circumstances there was no alternative.

Blenkiron swore again.

"It's my belief they want to get rid of you," he said, jerking his head in the direction of the official residence. "They've found that the country is lukewarm about our activities, and the Wool crowd have been propagating. . . . Good Lord, as if you could run a penny bank by a majority vote! What the devil have the votes of a few million lunatics to do with the science of credit! I've got an appointment with the Premier. I'm going to blackguard him and see what happens. Good-day, boy."

Blenkiron stumped back to the residence. Corbeyne could see that he was profoundly disturbed. Blenkiron scented trouble. Well, there was trouble enough to scent. Rather more trouble than Blenkiron knew.

"They want to get rid of you."

That was it, was it? That was the factor he had overlooked. He had counted, in his race against time, on a solid support from those who at heart were with

him, and the support was wavering because the country was lukewarm. . . .

Of course it was lukewarm. It was ignorant, helpless, pushed this way and that. The Bill would push it the right way. At all costs the Second Reading must not be postponed.

Corbeyne reached his chambers and sat down at his writing-table. He picked up a pencil and drew funny faces on the blotting pad and laughed. With a stroke of the pen the Premier could "postpone" the Second Reading. So much for his own grandiloquent battle for time! What a fool he had been to ignore the power of a lukewarm country! . . . Hullo, there was Miss Fellowes.

"Mrs. Corbeyne rang up twice at the office," announced Miss Fellowes. "The second time she dictated this message."

Corbeyne took the slip of paper. A message was written in Miss Fellowes' crisp, efficient hand.

"Urgent : Code message states nothing doing. Sorry. Sylvia."

"Thank you," said Corbeyne, and tore the slip. Miss Fellowes was still there and he wished she would go. "It looks as though we have an hour or two of breathing space, Miss Fellowes. If I were you I would make good use of the time and go home."

It was not quite the right way to talk to Miss Fellowes. He could see that she did not like it and he was sorry. But she went home, and that was the main consideration.

Well, Sylvia had failed. One line of retreat had been cut off. It was perjury—technical only, but perjury in the eyes of the law—or else——

He picked up a pen and started on a sheet of clean notepaper.

"Dear Prime Minister. On consideration I find with very deep regret that I cannot take the course you re-

commend. I have, therefore, no alternative to begging you to accept my resignation. I am, my dear Prime Minister, yours very truly, John Corbeyne."

It fitted neatly on to the front page, and there was the end of it. That single sheet of notepaper, if he put it in an envelope and despatched it, would strengthen the hold of the Government on a country that knew nothing of the science of credit and cared less. And Deagle would get his Bill, and Blenkiron's heart would be broken, and there would be more unemployed smashing bigger windows, and Europe would go to hell and drag America with it, and Sylvia——

Because he hesitated to commit technical perjury.

"What do you want, Garfield?"

"The gentleman is waiting in the hall, sir," said Garfield, handing a card.

"Mortimer Deagle."

Corbeyne looked at the card as if it were a curiosity. There was a cool egotism in the absence of the conventional "Mr." that fascinated. He toyed with it while Garfield waited. The second line of attack had materialised as well, then. Katherine had taken counsel with Deagle; and Deagle, as Corbeyne had predicted, had come to state his own particular price.

It would not be an effective snub to send him away.

"I will see Mr. Deagle."

CHAPTER XXXII

PERJURY

DEAGLE, self-possessed, restrained, and faintly perfumed, entered the room with an air that suggested he was entering a church.

"Mr. Corbeyne, I am grateful to you for seeing me, grateful," said Deagle. "Frankly, I expected to be shown the door." There was the distinct impression that he had been deeply moved by not being shown the door.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Deagle?"

"Thanks!" There was a pause, while Deagle somewhat elaborately seated himself. "We are in opposite camps, Mr. Corbeyne. When I am dead my biographer, if he is a discerning man, will find in that simple fact the tragedy of my career."

Too flowery, thought Corbeyne! He had noticed that before about Deagle. Just a little bit clumsy, too!

"Our unfortunate difference of opinion," continued Deagle, "has compelled me to hurl myself against you."

Corbeyne smiled with the corners of his lips.

"You are convinced that my International Credit Bill would be disastrous to this country?" he asked.

"Not in the least," replied Deagle, unruffled. "To be frank, I have scarcely considered it on its merits. I am not a statesman, Mr. Corbeyne. I am a business

man, whose business interests have led him to politics. I make no pretence of altruism. You have uncompromisingly rejected a proposal which would advance my business interests—incidentally I honestly believe it would benefit the country, but let that pass. Speaking politically, you have slapped me in the face. Naturally I have retaliated with all my strength. It's the law of the wild—which is still the law of our vaunted civilisation."

Corbeyne was getting impatient. The fellow had not called in order to talk about the law of the wild.

"But civilisation has added to that law—oh yes. It has added to brute strength, intelligence. To enterprise, endurance. To craft——"

"Blackmail."

The word fell with the ring of steel into the quiet room. Corbeyne's eyes were fixed upon his opponent. He saw a momentary gleam in the colourless eyes; the gleam was not one of surprise.

"My dear Mr. Corbeyne! My dear sir! A harsh word to use, surely! To designate the exchange of favours by such a sinister term——" Deagle shook his head, and relapsed into sorrowful contemplation of his boots. Corbeyne waited.

"No, no!" went on Deagle, when the silence was becoming awkward. "I shall assume that your abrupt—your impulsive remark was intended merely as an intimation that we need not beat about the bush. Well, we will not. We have a—er—a mutual friend, Mr. Corbeyne."

Still Corbeyne was silent, but his silence forced Deagle to meet his eyes.

"I refer to that poor lady, who is known as Mrs. Brierly," confided Deagle in a whisper.

He might have been the family doctor, or the family lawyer, or the family butler even. His whisper throbbed with a respectful sympathy.

"Now that Mrs. Brierly and I have quarrelled finally, you are trying to seize your advantage once more," said Corbeyne. "But we are back in our old positions, with this difference—I am no longer a pawn in the game."

Deagle took out his gold pince-nez, wiped them carefully and adjusted them. He looked like a bishop just about to award the prizes for good-conduct.

"I feel," he said benevolently, "that it is possible that I may be able to smooth over what you call the final quarrel; that I may be able to induce Mrs. Brierly to abandon her present determination to reopen that divorce case of so many years ago. I could even persuade her, I think, to leave England altogether, provided some arrangement were made by which you continued your political career and yet relieved her solitude occasionally. Mrs. Brierly would not, I fancy, close her ears to my arguments. I have been able before now to guide her gently to an altered point of view. Hence my conviction that at this juncture also I may be able to effect a reconciliation."

"You spoke at the beginning of this conversation of an *exchange* of favours, Mr. Deagle."

The benevolent eyes grew, if possible, even more mild.

"Ah yes! Yes. Human nature, my dear sir, human nature. We can be of service to each other; we are both aware of the nature of those services. Give and take—give and take."

Corbeyne's mind leapt aside for an instant.

"Do you read *The Plain Man*, Mr. Deagle?"

Deagle bowed, and shook his head at the same time.

"I do not, but I have heard of the attack it has made upon you," he elucidated. "From Mrs. Brierly I understand that hostilities were commenced at the instigation of a man actuated merely by stupidity and malice. I will confess that *The Plain Man* annoyed me almost as much as it did you, Mr. Corbeyne."

"It took the wind out of your sails," remarked Corbeyne bitterly.

"Mr. Corbeyne, I beg!" Deagle looked hurt. "I must protest against such a brutal representation of the facts."

"As you please," snapped Corbeyne. "But you will at least agree that, supposing I were to give your Combine the concessions you demand, and you, in return, were to—stabilise my social position, your part of the bargain would be valueless with *The Plain Man* vigorously defending the libel action I am bringing and justifying its innuendoes by producing as witnesses Pelt and Mrs. Brierly! If destruction looms upon me from that quarter in any case, why should I accept your bribe? It does not go far enough. You can save me from Mrs. Brierly, but you cannot save me from *The Plain Man*."

"On the contrary," purred Deagle, "I can give you security there also. I hold a controlling interest in *The Plain Man*. You have but to say the word and I will order the Editor to print an unqualified apology."

Corbeyne got to his feet and went towards the window. Air—he wanted air. The scent of those beastly Russian cigarettes was all over the place.

"Possibly you doubt my ability to do this, Mr. Corbeyne. As a proof of my authority in this direction, let me tell you that when I heard of the paragraphs concerning you in this week's issue I sent the Editor immediate instructions to hold up next week's number—to make no further move in the matter at all—until he heard from me."

Corbeyne heard the unctuous voice as from a great distance. It was the see-saw again, the dipping, rising scales.

In one, security for himself from *The Plain Man*, and the perjury into which retaliation would thrust him; security for Sylvia and the child from Katherine and her revelations; an unobtrusive retirement from

the sphere of politics into a sphere of desolation so great that even Katherine's demands would be meaningless in the end; a continued ignorance on Sylvia's part of all that had threatened her honour and her child's. . . .

In the other scale, the work that must go on if the helpless, lukewarm country was to be saved.

"Well, Mr. Corbeyne?"

Corbeyne turned and came back to the writing-table. His hand sought and found the letter he had written to the Prime Minister. He handed it to Deagle.

"Read it, please."

He heard Deagle give a deep sigh of satisfaction. Then he heard himself laugh.

"I wrote that just before you came in, Mr. Deagle. I wanted to see how it looked on paper. Because, you see, if I were once to bargain with you, I should not consider myself worthy to remain Minister of Credit; I should resign at once."

Deagle returned the letter. His voice betrayed his sense of triumph.

"Drastic, drastic! But that is your affair. And perhaps it is better so. Ah, yes, perhaps——" He took out another cigarette and struck a match to light it.

"Wait," said Corbeyne.

He leant forward. With a corner of his letter to the Prime Minister he touched the match.

He held the burning letter of resignation before Deagle for as long as he could, then stamped the ashes out on the carpet.

Deagle was ominously quiet.

"Wait," repeated Corbeyne.

He picked up the receiver of the telephone and a moment later was speaking to Bayliss, his solicitor.

"Bayliss? This *Plain Man* affair. I've decided to apply for an injunction to restrain publication next week. Will you fix it up right away? . . . Yes, so I understand. It's a simple matter, isn't it? I take

it I just go before the judge in the first instance and swear the thing is a lie. . . . Right! Go ahead like greased lightning." He banged down the receiver.

"Perjury, Mr. Corbeyne!" said Deagle with the same deadly calm. "Perjury!"

"Quite so. Technically, at any rate. But it will prevent the appearance of that dirty rag with further disclosures, as they call it. In other words, on the day my Bill comes up for Second Reading, *The Plain Man* will not appear. Afterwards——"

"Afterwards," cut in Deagle, and his voice quavered suddenly with excitement, "afterwards there will be a judgment in favour of *The Plain Man* because it will have proved its case; then the prosecution of yourself for perjury. There will be also the re-opening of the divorce case by Mrs. Brierly and the intolerable position into which it will put the present Mrs. Corbeyne and your child."

"But my Bill will have become Law," said Corbeyne.

They remained staring at each other. There was no benevolence now in Deagle's eyes.

"You say your Bill will have become Law. You speak as though you had plenty of time at your disposal. Are you reckoning on delay merely because in many cases the machinery of the law is cumbersome? I do not wish to brag, Mr. Corbeyne, but in this direction also I have some little weight. It might well be that in a week—or two at most——"

"You must find the man Shrager first," shrugged Corbeyne.

Kindness shot back to Deagle's regard. He beamed, he twinkled.

"Would you be good enough, Mr. Corbeyne, to ring for your servant?"

Corbeyne stared and rang.

"I thank you. I thank you. Ah—er—you permit me?" He turned to Garfield. "My chauffeur is downstairs. I want him up here."

Corbeyne's jaw set grimly. It looked as though Deagle could lay his hand easily on the one-time detective; as though he could send his car to fetch him. The silence was intolerable. Deagle sat with closed eyes, wrapped in meditation.

"Yessir?"

The chauffeur had come in. A square, heavy-jawed man. Corbeyne glanced at his face, at first indifferently then with startled intentness. He half rose, and sat down again.

"Shrager," said Deagle, opening his eyes luxuriously, "you will remember that some eleven years ago, when you were a private detective in the employment of Mr. Rason, you supplied the necessary evidence against a lady called Mrs. Corbeyne. She defended the action."

"Yessir. I went into the box, sir."

"This gentleman is Mr. Corbeyne, who brought the action. He would like a few words with you. I——" Deagle rose amiably—"will wait downstairs in the car. I am in no hurry whatever. I will bid you good-day, Mr. Corbeyne, and if you have any further contribution to make to the little discussion we have had, you know my address."

He disappeared.

Corbeyne brought his eyes slowly back to the stolid figure of the chauffeur standing by the door. Shrager's face was not a particularly intelligent one, but the eyes were straightforward enough.

"You remember the case?" asked Corbeyne.

"Yessir. It was the only defended case I ever 'ad to do with, sir. I remember perticklerly feeling sorry for the lady, if you'll excuse my saying so, seeing that she couldn't 'ope to back up 'er story."

"How so?"

"Why, I seen Lord 'Enry Graunham with me own eyes, sir, when I served the papers on 'im. There wasn't no getting over that. That's what I said to

Mr. Deagle the other day when 'e told me there was some tale or other that she was right all the time, and Lord 'Enry wasn't there."

"Ah, he mentioned that to you?"

"Yessir. And I said there must be some mistake, sir. I shadowed the lady and Lord 'Enry a good 'arf-dozen times before they went down to that cottage, sir, and there's no likelihood of me being mistaken."

Corbeyne pondered.

"It seems that on the date on which you say you served the papers on Lord Henry Graunham, he was actually in prison under another name. Did Mr. Deagle tell you that?"

"'E said somethink to that effect, sir. And all I can say is there must be some mistake. Lord 'Enry Graunham was at that cottage when I said 'e was."

Corbeyne leant forward.

"Has it occurred to you that the man you saw at the cottage might have been someone else—not Lord Henry Graunham?"

"It has, sir, and it wasn't," replied Shrager.

"You might have been mistaken on the point of identity."

"Begging your pardon, sir, I might not," replied Shrager. He was emphatic, but not aggressive. "Cor! I began followin' up Lord 'Enry in the May before the August if you remember, sir. I was standing by when 'e was chucked out of the Royal Enclosure at Goodwood. I was standing by the night he had trouble with the Empire and Mrs. Corbeyne nearly got run in with 'im——"

There was a flood of it. It became clear at any rate that Shrager, whether from honest conviction or some other motive, intended to stick to his tale.

"Do you realise that by continuing to insist that Lord Henry Graunham was at that cottage when it is now proved that he was in prison—you may be convicted of perjury?"

"Perjury after eleven years!" echoed Shrager. "Matter of three months, sir, if *that*. I reckon Mr. Deagle'll pay my money while I'm doing it."

Corbeyne was silent. Deagle had evidently made an arrangement which envisaged the possibility of prison for Shrager.

Corbeyne tried another line.

"I've been looking for you for some weeks, Shrager. You went to America, didn't you?"

"Yessir. I was a bit tired of the 'tec line. I was out o' work when I come back and mighty glad when Mr. Deagle run accrost me. Two months ago, that was. I'd trained for a chauffeur in the States and Mr. Deagle—'e gave me a job with 'im."

"I see." Corbeyne hesitated. Then—"You wouldn't consider going back to the States quietly and staying there for a bit at my expense? The warrant for perjury, if there is one issued, will lapse in due course and then you can come back if you like. You can tell Mr. Deagle that I made you this offer, if you wish."

"Yessir. After all Mr. Deagle 'as done for me, sir, I don't want to leave 'im in the lurch as it were, sir, thanking you all the same."

Corbeyne nodded. He was too late. Deagle had been before him. With Shrager ready and resigned, the prosecution for perjury might well begin within the month.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes. No. Wait a minute. Take this down to Mr. Deagle with my compliments."

Corbeyne reached for pen and paper and wrote a line or two. Shrager took it and left the room.

Corbeyne sat on at his desk, a grim smile on his lips. The note he had written had been to the point.

"*Dear Mr. Deagle,*" it had run, "*You can go to hell,*
John Corbeyne."

CHAPTER XXXIII

SYLVIA V. KATHERINE

THAT morning, after dictating the message to Miss Fellowes, Sylvia went to the bank. The bank manager was busy when she arrived, but became at immediate liberty when told that Mrs. Corbeyne wished to see him.

Sylvia greeted him pleasantly, accepted a chair, and told him of the possibility of her requiring large amounts of cash. The brief discussion that followed was a mere formal arrangement of securities. Courtesy alone restrained the manager from pointing out that her visit had been quite unnecessary.

"I've been looking through my pass book," she said as the discussion ended, "and I am rather puzzled by a particular entry. There's a cheque to a Mr. Brierly of fifty pounds per week. That is in order. I see also that for the last five weeks a payment of ten pounds has been entered to the same name. I can find no cheques in the wallet——"

There was an awkward pause. Then the bank manager cleared his throat and dived into a difficult subject.

"Those payments are the result of your letter to me of—er—last month," he said, and hoped that that would be enough.

"I'm afraid I don't remember writing to you last month," said Sylvia puzzled. "Oh yes. You mean the letter about my husband's first wife."

"Precisely," said the bank manager. "Your letter instructed us to continue the payment of the allowance unless the lady should express unwillingness to receive it. We recommenced the payments, and—er—received no protest."

"Yes, yes," said Sylvia impatiently, "but why have you recorded them under the name of 'Brierly'?"

The bank manager smiled vaguely, murmuring something.

"I beg your pardon?" said Sylvia. Then, before he could speak again, she understood. She knew what he was going to say.

"That is the name which the—er—first Mrs. Corbeyne has assumed."

"Yes," said Sylvia. "Quite so, of course." There was a silly mist between her and the bank manager's silly smile.

"The reason why there are no cheques is that we make the payment and debit your account, as is usual in such cases. I am afraid I took it for granted that . . ."

The words trailed off into the mist. Sylvia knew she was sitting so terribly still that the man must see she had had a shock. She tried to lift her hand in a natural way to a fold of her sunshade, but she could not. There was lead in her veins where once the quick blood had flowed. . . .

The first Mrs. Corbeyne had assumed the name of Brierly. John Corbeyne had assumed the name of Brierly. The first Mrs. Corbeyne had assumed the name of—— Why did the bank manager stroke his chin as if he had a beard? Perhaps he had had a beard once, and had taken a false name. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something. Sylvia heard herself say it.

"Would you be good enough to give me Mrs. Brierly's address?" she asked. (In another minute he would wrench the invisible beard out by the roots.)

"Well, I'm afraid—you see the rule of the Bank—that is, I could forward a letter for you, Mrs. Corbeyne."

"That would not be any good," said Sylvia dully. "I want to go and see her at once. It's—it's an important matter."

"Ah—really, Mrs. Corbeyne, you are putting me in a very difficult position. Mrs. Brierly is a client of ours."

He looked at her deprecatingly, with homage for her beauty and breeding and youth. Sylvia remembered that she looked very nice. She whipped up her vitality.

"That simplifies it wonderfully," she said with a regal lift of the head. "You can act promptly in the interests of your client. By the simple act of giving me her address now you will save her from losing five hundred a year. There now, Mr. Barfoot, you really cannot hesitate, can you?"

She smiled at the bank manager. She knew she was, as Carfax would put it, "wangling him." She must, must, *must* have something to tell the Jobber. She was ready now to smile whenever it would help her to protect that "something" that she might one day tell. The smile melted the Bank manager. She watched the melting with cold interest below her charming cloak of gratitude. She had not known before that she could do that kind of thing with men. The knowledge might be useful.

"When the Bank decides to dispense with my services, Mrs. Corbeyne, I shall come to you for a job!" Mr. Barfoot pressed a bell. He said things to a clerk, who presently brought him a book.

"Um—ah—no. There's been a change of address since then," muttered the manager, looking down its columns.

"From Ealing?" asked Sylvia on an impulse.

"Er—yes—er—here we are—Forty-seven St. George's Mansions, Red Lion Square," said the manager, and banged the book shut.

"Thank you," said Sylvia. She smiled long after she had left his office, and the smile was a very gallant thing.

Brierly—Mrs. Brierly. The *divorcée* had taken the name of Brierly. She had recently moved from Ealing. Easy enough for a child to guess and be sure that the *divorcée* and the woman with whom John Corbeyne had lived at Ealing were one and the same—terribly hard for Sylvia to guess all that and be as sure when she knew so well John's attitude to his first wife.

If John had not hated his first wife it had only been because she had passed out of his life. He spoke of her as an unpleasant memory of which he was partly ashamed. Now and again he would make an involuntary grimace at the thought that he had once felt physical love for her.

And John had gone back to her.

There were a number of theories, but not one that would embrace all the facts. The most promising of a bad lot was perhaps Carfax's nonsensical suggestion that John Corbeyne had gone mad. Mixed in with a little of Carfax's version of German philosophy one could just arrive at the re-birth of a physical passion. It was a poor attempt at reconstruction, but it was at least better than the blackmail theory. If Katherine had in some inconceivable way blackmailed him, he would have talked it over.

Sylvia spent the day with her thoughts. They rode her savagely through the lonely hours, and would not leave her when she retired to rest.

A bad night brought a blurred confusion of wonder in which, jumbled with the greater issues, was an overwhelming, intimate curiosity to see the woman who, at the age of thirty-nine, could drag a clean, upright man from a happy home and a great career.

By the time Sylvia had finished pretending to take breakfast she had further resolved, with frank feminine

cruelty, to see this woman in the morning light. By eleven o'clock she was knocking at the door of the flat in Red Lion Square.

She knocked twice before the door was answered by a general servant, uncouth, but efficient-looking.

"I wish to see Mrs. Brierly, please," said Sylvia, and entered the hall.

"I don't know as she's dressed yet," answered the maid, staring greedily at Sylvia's plain dark dress and plain, costly furs. "What name shall I say?"

"Mrs. Corbeyne."

The maid was absent for quite a long time. She came back with an expression of exasperated unconcern.

"I don't think she'll see you," she announced impartially. "She said you could write anything you wanted to say."

Sylvia had no intention of mincing matters.

"I'm not going to leave until I have seen her," she said.

"Oh, aren't you——"

"Don't be rude or silly," said Sylvia, and handed her a pound note. "Take me somewhere where I can sit and wait until she's dressed."

"Oh, well, it's no affair of mine, I'm sure, I'm here for the cooking," said the maid and took her into the room with the elaborate ash-trays.

Sylvia looked at the ash-trays, and the tantalus like a Greek Temple. The little room was exactly like the side-window of a third-rate furnishing shop. Had—"Mrs. Brierly" fitted it up for John. Before Sylvia's mental vision floated a picture of the study at Corbeyne House; its panelled dignity, its velvet shadows, its heavily carpeted quiet.

"And she thinks he will use a room like this," her baffled spirit cried out to her. "She chose those ash-trays, and she is thirty-nine, and her reputation is unsavoury, and she got him back!"

Sylvia rose. She was suddenly afraid. Afraid of the complete incredibility of it all. She wanted to run away.

And then Katherine came in.

With Katherine's entrance courage came back to Sylvia—more than courage; strength and shrewdness and even a dim ghost of hope. For Katherine did not so much come in as "enter the room which contained the woman who bore his name." She bowed, she lifted her eyebrows, she drew her draperies round her; and Sylvia, watching it all, knew in a flash that John had gone back to this woman because of some hold she had on him, and not because he wanted to. Re-birth of physical passion! Oh, perhaps, if she had been anything but the faded, theatrical fool she was! If she had not powdered too much and perfumed too much and worn a rest-gown in the middle of the morning and said, as she did now in an affected, throaty drawl—

"To what do I owe the—pleasure of this visit, Mrs. Corbeyne?"

Sylvia wanted to chuckle. It was a complete excerpt from a tired play—complete even to the hesitation before the word "pleasure." But Sylvia wanted a good many things more than she wanted that chuckle.

"You are indebted chiefly to *The Plain Man*," she said briskly.

Katherine's lips tightened and she looked her visitor insolently up and down. But she was at a loss for a retort. A slow-witted creature, thought Sylvia, of flaccid nerves.

"I am still waiting, Mrs. Corbeyne."

Another cliché. Somehow she must be startled out of her set phrases. It did not matter in the least what weapon was used. There was a law beyond the law of good breeding and already Sylvia had bowed to its purpose.

"Are you getting your allowance regularly?" she asked.

That, at any rate, had the effect of breaking the pose. Katherine ceased abruptly to suggest the provincial stage. She grew quite natural and quite offensive.

"Oh, that's what you've come about, is it?" she sneered. "You've been telling *him* how kind and generous you've been and he's told you to find out why I didn't say anything about it. Well, you can tell him from me that it's a good thing I did put the ten pounds a week safely away somewhere where he couldn't drink it, otherwise where should I be now he's thrown all my sacrifices in my face and gone off—back to *you*, I s'pose, Mrs. Corbeyne, as you call yourself, but you just wait!"

She paused for breath. Sylvia's wits were busy with the tangle. This unutterable woman had said nothing to John about the continuation of the original allowance. She had grabbed it with one eye on the future. That didn't matter very much. It was more important to learn that she and John had quarrelled and parted. And then there was "Mrs. Corbeyne, as you call yourself." And why "just wait?" Sylvia tingled with excitement. Oh, decidedly, John had gone back to this kind of thing because he had had no choice, because of some hold she had. Some hold. . . . "Mrs. Corbeyne, as you call yourself. . . ."

Sylvia gathered herself together and said the most odious thing she could think of.

"Of course I call myself 'Mrs. Corbeyne'; I have every right to do so. *I* haven't been divorced by John Corbeyne for unfaithfulness with a man who wouldn't even marry me."

It had immediate effect. The passion in Katherine's face drove every vestige of colour from it, left her eyes blazing, her lips twisted; the hoarse words struggling in her throat. She laughed, and Sylvia

told herself that if she died for it she must show no fear.

"So he hasn't told you, hasn't he? Ha, ha! Quarrelled with me and hasn't the nerve to go back to you! Poor old John, he *has* fallen between two stools!" Her savage mockery drove her into the room, close to Sylvia. "*Poor* old John! Ah, but he's going to pay now, at last, and so are you, for all the years you've been sneering and jeering and trying to forget me like a bad debt! You listen here——"

Her hand was on Sylvia's shoulder, shaking it. Even in Sylvia's bewildered disgust she was able to reflect that this kind of woman always paws one, if it can.

"You're not John Corbeyne's wife and I am. The divorce was a fake, and this very week I'm going to prove it in a Court of Law, so there."

There was a silence. Inevitably Katherine calmed down.

"You can understand that much, can't you?" she persisted. "Here, sit down!"

Sylvia sat down. The chair was of very new leather, and the scent of it, mingled with Katherine's *trefle incarnat* had made her feel quite faint. Nothing else, of course, because this amazing tale of a faked divorce was, in a way, no surprise. She had suspected a blackmail hold. If she had been a little cleverer she might have guessed. . . .

"What do you mean when you say that the divorce was a fake?" she asked slowly, and then realised that Katherine would not respond to a moderate tone. It was only if she were insulted that she would talk. "You're a very bad liar, Mrs. Brierly," she added. "You've acquiesced in an injustice for eleven years and now you expect people to listen to you?"

"*Expect* them to listen? They're listening to me already! I've got friends—friends with money—friends that'll show you and John I was telling the

truth when I said eleven years ago that I wasn't with Lord Henry Graunham at that cottage in Kent."

"But you were," said Sylvia. "John's lawyers proved it."

"Mighty clever they were, too," shrilled Katherine. "Two months ago Lord Henry Graunham died in prison under the name of James Carvick. Well, as James Carvick he was in prison when he was supposed to be with me in that cottage. I can prove that now. I couldn't before, because I didn't know he was Jim Carvick. I didn't know myself where he was or why he hadn't turned up. But now I can get my rights. That's to say——" Katherine paused and Sylvia guessed that she had groped in her memory as she continued—"the divorce was granted under a misapprehension of facts and is bound to be set aside."

A blackmail hold. . . . A stranglehold! Sylvia's vision was clearing. Whether Katherine were lying in whole or in part it was at least obvious that she had a tale that could be supported by some sort of evidence—or the lack of evidence, which was much the same thing. And John must have believed her. He must have returned to her as a price for her silence and then been unable to stand her and broken away again, telling her to do her worst. . . . No, wait, that wasn't the part to ferret out just now. This "fake" divorce was the key, the crux. She must fully understand the situation it presented. . . .

"Just a minute," she said scornfully. "There were letters of Lord Henry Graunham, I understood, making the arrangements with you. How shall you deny that?"

"I'm not denying that," nagged Katherine. "I've no need to. I'll admit that I was expecting him and that he didn't come, if you've any idea how beastly John used to be to me in those days—different to what he is now——"

"You seem to be rather confused," interposed Sylvia. "It doesn't matter very much whether Lord Henry Graunham was there or not. The fact that someone was there is sufficient for the validity of the divorce."

"How dare you say that to me? There was no one else there."

"Nonsense," said Sylvia. "There was the evidence of the detective. He might have been mistaken in his man but he wouldn't have believed there was a man there when there was not."

"Of course he didn't," said Katherine. "He knew there wasn't a man there. He committed perjury and I'm going to have him up for it and let him go to prison."

"But why should he commit perjury?"

"Because John paid him, of course."

Sylvia knew that sensation of having narrowly escaped making a fool of oneself which a man expresses by a whistle. For a second or two she had nearly been fool enough to believe that the detective had committed perjury. When it was accompanied by the statement that John Corbeyne had paid him to commit perjury, she was able to gauge its absurdity. That, at any rate, was more absurd than his supposed infatuation with the woman who was still pointing a theatrical finger at her.

"When did Lord Henry Graunham go to prison?" she asked.

"On the twenty-eighth of August. And he was supposed to be with me in September."

There flashed into Sylvia's mind the bare possibility that Katherine had conspired in procuring a wrongful divorce against herself for some later purpose, such as her present one.

"At the time when you, on your own admission, agreed to live with him at this cottage, did you know that he was in danger of going to prison?"

"I was never more surprised at anything in my life than when I found out, which I didn't do until two months ago, that he'd been in prison at all," answered Katherine. She was talking rationally now, almost impersonally.

There was a pause.

"I find it all rather difficult to believe," said Sylvia at length. "A man agrees to elope with you and then doesn't turn up. Speaking for myself, if I had agreed to elope with a man and live with him in a cottage and he didn't turn up, I should give him about an hour's grace and then leave the cottage. You seem to have been waiting for him at the cottage indefinitely—very flattering to him!"

Heavens, how easy the creature was! One had but to stab her vanity and she would instantly guard it.

"Oh, yes, you can try and make out I haven't got any pride, that won't hurt me or anyone, and it won't help you either! I don't need to be hanging round a man's neck the whole time. We arranged that I should go on first and Henry'd join me there about the middle of the following month, as he had some business to attend to."

"The middle of the following month!" repeated Sylvia. "When was this arrangement made?"

Katherine hesitated a moment.

"It must have been about the twenty-seventh," she answered slowly. Sylvia noted the painful accuracy and guessed that the date had been carefully memorised. "After the twenty-seventh," added Katherine, "I never saw him again."

"When did you leave the cottage?"

"I don't remember," answered Katherine with an indifference which suggested she realised that the point was unimportant to her. "It's rather a blur, that time. Besides, I went on hoping Lord Henry would come. I'm not ashamed of it. But he didn't come—and that's all that matters."

"You expect me to believe," exclaimed Sylvia, "that you consented to leave your husband in order to live for a period that may have been days or weeks—alone—on the offchance of a recalcitrant lover turning up to console you?"

The fury of defence Sylvia waited for did not come. Katherine looked at the door as though she wanted to retreat.

"Why not? Besides, how can I remember dates after eleven years?" she countered. "It may have been a week or it may have been more, and when all's said and done what's it got to do with you?"

Sylvia ignored that.

"But the detective who was put on to shadow you—he must have made reports to his employers? Does he bear you out in saying that you were alone at the cottage?"

"Of course he doesn't. He reported meetings and so on that never took place. Don't I tell you he was paid to lie about it?"

"Does he stick to his lies?" asked Sylvia. "You've seen him, I suppose. What does he say?"

"I haven't seen him, but my friend has, and he says he sticks to his tale all right, though he knows the prison records are against him, but that don't matter. I don't care about that. What matters to me is that once he's convicted of perjury the divorce can't stand, and I'll be Mrs. Corbeyne and you'll be what you thought I was."

Sylvia harked back.

"When did you see John again?"

"I never saw him again at all—not until the other day so to speak."

Sylvia made a mental note of the answer and then rose. She wanted to get away and think it all out. She wanted to order the turbulent confusion in her mind and separate fact from intuition. Above all she wanted to examine her deep conviction that Katherine

was not the type to await the leisurely wooing of a lover—still less of the type that would accept the unjust service of divorce papers without protesting her innocence to her husband.

"You are going to see to it that my marriage is nullified and my child made illegitimate," she said. "I wonder why. You hate me, but not as much as all that. And as for John, you tired of him before he tired of you. Why do you want to destroy him?"

"I didn't so long as he gave me what I wanted, so long as he set me right with people who'd been beasts to me. But he let me down—all Ealing knows by now that I'm not *respectable*—at least, it thinks it does, and it won't know better till the case comes on and gives me my good name back again."

Sylvia grasped the gist of it. That unctuous little man—what was his name? Pelt—Pelt had talked, no doubt. Mr. Brierly was a social prop to Mrs. Brierly; but Mr. Corbeyne and Mrs. Brierly—Sylvia dived into her smattering of psycho-analysis, and supposed that respectability would matter terribly to a woman who had gone off the rails and found it didn't pay. However, she was answered. For Ealing's good opinion, then, she and John and the Jobber were to be offered up.

"Not but what I wouldn't be willing to let everything go if John would come back again," wept Katherine suddenly, "and so I told—my friend—but he says things have been arranged now, and there's no backing out of it, but if John hasn't gone back to you after all, and all he still cares about is that work of his, I'm sure there's nothing to prevent him and me being all to each other that we once were." She sobbed convulsively.

Sylvia looked at her. Her agitation was real, at last. So there was more than Ealing behind it, after all. This stale, stupid thing wanted John back. Wanted a man as fine, as selfless as any in the world.

"She wants what is mine!" flashed something in Sylvia's brain, and immediately there was laughter in her soul. "Mine!"

She went out of the appalling little room as though she were exalted. "Mine," she whispered. "Mine!"

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CHAPTER XXXIV

SUSPICION

NORMALLY Sylvia had an abundance of physical energy, but now her reserves were low. The interview with Katherine came near to exhausting her.

In the tale that Katherine had told her were many suspicious points, many weak links, and one or two personal improbabilities.

In that cosy little room off her bedroom, which she had always refused to call a boudoir, she tried to go over the story systematically, cynically, as a lawyer might. She made little progress. Her concentration was weak. With a pencil she was trying to link up dates and persons, and with the rest of her she was saying——

“He left me because she blackmailed him. Not because he wanted her, but because she blackmailed him. Suppose this awful story is true in its essentials and he knew it? It must be true in its essentials or he would not have gone away.

“Why didn’t he talk it over with me? Oh, *why* didn’t he talk it over with me! He used to talk about everything.”

For a time the question was unanswerable, then at last came a glimmering of the truth. It came in the light of the conversation they had had about Deagle and whether the Ministry should be corrupted by compromise. She had shrunk from the responsibility of

decision. She would have shrunk from the responsibility of deciding whether or not they should fight this woman, and publicly challenge whatever legal backing she might have. As husband he had spared her from the pain of decision when, as fellow-conspirator, he had been bound to demand her choice.

Again memory flew back to that last intimate talk they had had. He had been depressed and a little abstracted. He had laboured a point that had seemed to her almost platonic in the absence of any direct application to their own lives.

"Supposing any action of mine were to cast a stigma upon our child, would you hate me?" he had asked. It had seemed a silly question then, but she had learnt that he had a certain simplicity of wisdom that often seemed superficially silly, and she had answered him seriously and said that she would hate him if any action of his were to cast a stigma upon the Jobber.

Things were beginning to grow clear. A man may think in syllogisms, but a woman thinks in pictures. . . . The pictures began to arrange themselves.

"Peer-criminal dies in prison. . . ." She saw herself seated on the arm of his chair while she helped him talk about that first disastrous marriage. She saw him leaving the house with the first sign of furtiveness she had ever noticed—and a few minutes previously there had been a telephone call. There had been friends to dinner, and afterwards she had withheld her kiss—in order that he might telephone his solicitor. And later, all unknowingly, she had given her decision, that she would hate him if he were to fight Katherine and lose.

The pictures began to invert themselves. Those pictures had been built of the fragments of memory, but now they were constructed by the sympathetic intuition that had been born and nurtured in their years of love.

She saw him preoccupied and abstracted, scarcely able to concentrate upon his work, as the problem gnawed at his nerves. He was eating little, and he was forgetting to come and play with the Jobber. He was thinking that if he were to tell her the whole truth she would advise him to fight—oh, he would have trusted her for that—and he would have had to fight, knowing that she would hate him if he were to lose. He had been talking to Bayliss, who had doubtless told him that the woman might win her action. She saw him trying to pretend to her that nothing in particular was happening—saw his urgent necessity to keep her ignorant which had led to the pitiful, vulgar lie that he had been “drawn from her side.”

She had seen the siren who had called John Corbeyne to a life of disgrace and misery and utterly refused to believe in her.

But she *had* believed in her. She herself had committed the grossness of believing that he had been “drawn from her side.” And for all these last tempestuous weeks, believing her wifeness to have been outraged, she had warded off the horror of discussing their relationship by the pretence that she thought he was his own double. . . . No, at least it was not a pretence, as it deceived no one in the wide world but poor old Jim Carfax. It was a stage convention. Each had promised to pretend they believed it.

She would go to him and say in effect, “You misled me, but I have been a cruel fool and I’m sorry.” And they would explain to each other and forgive each other——

And then?

It was like telling a story to the Jobber, who never grasped an ending. “And then?” he would ask. . . . She would apologise for the wrong she had done him and he would apologise for the wrong he had done her—and then?

The house telephone buzzed.

"I am here," said the voice of John Corbeyne speaking from the study. "Can you spare me a minute?"

"Yes, certainly," she answered without hesitation.

The hesitation began as she replaced the receiver. Her first thought was for him. The explanation would inevitably create the same emotional storm in him as in herself—at a time when he was fighting tooth and claw for his existence.

The second thought was for herself. To throw herself upon him at that point would hurt her pride—not that that was the dominant reason. There was another. To speak to him then would be to leap into the darkness of her own unexplored self-doubts and misgivings. It was the wrong moment to come to him. She must come when he clamoured for her as his wife—for so long as the sword hung over them he needed a comrade and not a wife—for so long as the sword hung over them the Convention must hold.

She rose and, passing into her dressing-room, looked at herself in the long triple mirror, fingering the delicate fabrics of her gown. She was aware of her beauty; John would be aware of it in spite of himself. And it was her charge, now, to guard him from weakness, as herself. . . . She sought swiftly for a plain, trim dress which took all subtlety from her colouring, slipped it on and smoothed her hair. Two minutes later she was shutting the door of the study behind her.

John was standing with one hand on the table, as he had stood that day in the House when he had made the first speech in defence of his Bill. His eyes met hers and she saw that a sudden youthful confidence had returned to him.

"You've settled *The Plain Man?*," she heard herself whisper.

"Yes."

She bit her lip. Her swift response to his thoughts had raised a ghost and she could see that he felt it there between them; a ghost of the days when it was their delight to know that he needed no words to communicate with her. . . . She turned aside, adjuring herself fiercely to be cautious; to help and not hinder him.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Bayliss took me along to apply for an injunction to restrain publication next Thursday," he was saying. "I—swore that the thing was untrue; it means a prosecution for perjury, possibly, but *The Plain Man* defended the injunction, of course, and produced Pelt's affidavit. Matters reached a deadlock more or less—it became just a toss-up whether it would be thumbs up or down with me. Then Ji—Lord Carfax, who had been gloriously active, managed to force the Editor into suggesting a compromise, and all the argument was cut short."

"What was the compromise?"

"*The Plain Man* is to appear next week, but it is not to contain any comment upon me whatsoever. It was a great triumph on Lord Carfax's part, because the Editor is entirely Mr. Deagle's mouthpiece."

"Mr. Deagle!"

"Yes. I don't understand how Deagle was persuaded to the compromise, but somehow it was done."

"Good old Jim!" murmured Sylvia. "But what about *The Plain Man's* remarks the week after next?"

"I expect they'll let themselves go then," said Corbeyne with a grin. "But don't forget that the Second Reading is next Thursday," he added as though he were addressing a public meeting. "We get it past that Second Reading and, normally speaking, there's nothing to prevent that Bill from becoming law." He paused and added with a nervous laugh. "And then—the Deluge."

She looked at him. Katherine's threats were in her ears.

"You mean the libel action against *The Plain Man*?" she asked carefully.

"That first of all. I—it's all extraordinarily complicated. There is—another action pending against me which I cannot attempt to describe."

"Connected with your—impersonation?" Her heart ached for the weariness that crept to his gaze.

"Yes. It is an action I am terribly likely to lose. It will be the end of everything for me, because the—publicity will mean suffering for you and the child."

Sylvia closed her eyes. She heard the echo of Katherine's—"I'll be Mrs. Corbeyne and you'll be what you thought I was."

"Perhaps," Sylvia answered the echo.

She saw surprise in his look and realised that she had spoken aloud. She laughed. She moved to the door. A new strength had come to her. Friends—John Corbeyne and she were friends again!

"We'll fight," she said, and went away.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON THE TRACK

WHILE Sylvia was girding on her armour, Lord Carfax, in his office in Fleet Street, was scowling at himself in a diminutive office mirror.

"I'm getting old. Wouldn't be the least bit surprised to find I'd lost weight. Nerves gone west. Bitten off more than I can chew. Flying kites like a fool amateur! Damn Brierly anyway!"

The telephone rang.

"Mrs. Corbeyne wishes to speak to you," said the girl at the main.

"Well, why don't you put her through!" snapped Lord Carfax.

"Is that you, Jim?" came the voice of Sylvia, and Carfax brightened at the tone. "I want to come and see you at your office. May I?"

"Of course you may, my dear, but what——?"

"Thank you so much. I'll fly."

The momentary exhilaration left him and he nodded grimly. Sylvia must know by now all about *The Plain Man*, he reflected, and very likely all about this morning's battle as well. It was doubtful, however, whether she grasped its full significance. Well, it would be his painful duty to explain it. He brightened at the prospect and drew the caller's chair nearer to his own.

"Poor little Sylvia!" he murmured affectionately.

It was not a poor little Sylvia who came in some five minutes later. It was a confident and slightly bustling Sylvia, very blue-eyed and golden-haired and radiantly frocked.

"Jim, you do look tired. You've been overworking," she said. As she seated herself she brought the chair even closer.

Carfax thought that very nice of her. Moreover, it gave him the opening he wanted.

"It's not work that kills, my dear, but worry," he said a trifle unctuously. He was always a trifle unctuous when he was giving expression to someone else's ideas. "And can you wonder?" He lowered his voice. "This *Plain Man* affair was bound to happen—simply bound to happen. But one would have thought he'd have cut out his private life entirely. If we hadn't got that compromise——"

"How did you get it, Jim?"

"Talked at the Editor."

"Yes, but the Editor is Mr. Deagle's man, isn't he? What was Deagle doing?"

Carfax looked excessively uncomfortable.

"He was—er—detained somewhere, my dear, between his flat and his office. I really am not at liberty—— But I will admit that I had an accomplice——"

"Miss Fellowes!" guessed Sylvia delightedly. "I shall get it out of her. Jim, you are a *pet*! Why do you worry so, when you're so clever? *The Plain Man* can say what it likes the week after next. The Bill will have passed the Second Reading and—he—will have done his—John's work."

"My dear girl, the work isn't everything! There's the libel action! If it comes into court you'll be dragged into it—er—inferentially. He can only prove he was leading a blameless life at Ealing by proving that he was doing the other thing up in Town. Gilbert

and Sullivan! General smash-up! The end of me, of course—not that that weighs unduly——”

“Nonsense!” cut in Sylvia. “You’ll be all right. We shall both swear that we deceived you.”

Carfax liked that quick “Nonsense!” It had a whiff of the old impudence. All the same, he didn’t understand what she meant and told her so.

“When the grand debacle comes,” she explained, “I shall swear that I told you he was my husband and he will swear the same.”

Carfax looked disapproving.

“Very sporting of you, my dear, but it won’t be as easy as all that. Besides—well, you’re so free and pure and open, Sylvia, you don’t seem to realise that beastly things will be said about you and this fellow—especially as he bears that marvellous resemblance. The awful part is, they just might believe you—and then they’d believe a lot more than the facts.”

“I can’t quite follow all that, Jim,” said Sylvia. “I only know that the work *is* everything, until there’s something else. I’ll tell you what I’ve come for, shall I?”

Carfax’s brow puckered. It was obvious that she could not understand the full gravity of the position. But it unpuckered as he saw her smiling up at him, looking remarkably lovely.

“Go ahead,” he invited.

“Who were John’s solicitors when he brought his action for divorce?” asked Sylvia.

“Good *night*!” exclaimed Carfax startled. “I don’t know. What on earth do you want to know for?”

“*Think*, Jimmy. I want to know quite a lot.”

“But why,” he demanded, staring at her vacantly and added: “on earth?”

Sylvia sighed.

“You’ve dropped into bad ways lately, Jim. When you were my guardian I taught you not to ask questions

and you were so slow at learning, and now you've backslided—or is it 'slid'?"

There was the whiff of the old impudence again—a positive tang of it.

"I don't know," he repeated.

"You said that before," Sylvia pointed out. "And you told me once that in your profession you never needed to know anything, as you knew the means of finding out everything. I thought it a rather clever epigram at the time, I remember, and now I've come to see how it works out in real life."

Carfax frowned and smiled. Sylvia was getting round him, he knew, and he liked her to get round him.

He asked her the date of the divorce and she told him. Then he pressed a bell-push. As a girl entered he gave her a date and asked her for the *Times* file.

Sylvia was quiet while the girl fetched the *Times*, and that gave Carfax time for thought. Carfax notoriously thought in theories. A theory leapt into his brain not unconnected with earlier theories of his of Germanic origin.

"Can it be that you intend to divorce John?"

"I thought that was coming," said Sylvia. "Oh, Jim, what a thing it is to have a constructive brain! But before I could ensnare Mr. Brierly there would still be the difficulty of divorcing Mrs. Brierly, wouldn't there? Hush, Jim, hush! Here comes your secretary."

The girl entered with a bound volume of the *Times*. Carfax turned up the date and groped.

"Of course, Sylvia, I've no earthly right to inquire into your motives or intentions——"

"How unkind of you, Jim!" said Sylvia. "Why not?"

This sort of thing, Carfax reminded himself, used to come under the heading of "badgering Guardy." Experience had taught that there was no means of

dealing with the situation. He fluttered the leaves of the *Times*.

"Here you are," he said grimly. "'Mr. Stranack, instructed by Messrs. Sowerby and Grand.'"

"Thank you so much," said Sylvia. "May I write it down? There! Either Mr. Sowerby or Mr. Grand will be able to tell me all about it, won't he?"

"You have decided to be flippant, Sylvia, but I should be very slow if I did not divine that there was some serious purpose behind this inquiry."

Sylvia nodded. A slender osprey in her hat tickled his cheek.

"There is, Jim. If only you would let me talk about my—motives and intentions—but you were quite huffy about it just now."

Carfax shrugged his shoulders and waved his palms like a comic-opera Frenchman.

"My motive and intention, Jim, is to find out whether John's divorce was in order."

"To find out whether——"

"Jim, you're repeating my words and you know how I hate that."

Lord Carfax swallowed.

"But why shouldn't it be?"

"It should be," said Sylvia.

"Sylvia," said Lord Carfax, dropping into his chair like a sack of wet bran, "will you come out to lunch?"

"I'd love to," answered Sylvia, "but I can't. I've got such heaps to do. You see, in a very short time we may have to pack up and run for our lives—he and I."

"In opposite directions," said Lord Carfax to himself, and aloud said nothing. Sylvia was standing now and he supposed she was going. But she put one hand on his opposite shoulder.

"If you were ever to find out that I had laughed at you, Jim, you'd forgive me, wouldn't you?" she asked. Her eyes were wonderful.

"As long as it was a joke that did not injure yourself," answered Carfax.

"Dear old Guardy!" said Sylvia, her cheek against his. "I really mean 'dear.'"

Lord Carfax wagged his head. Before he had done wagging it he realised that Sylvia had gone.

"In opposite directions!" he muttered. "I'm going to have a straight talk with that fellow Brierly."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE LADY SECRETARY

IT was late afternoon before Sylvia returned home. The house was very quiet. Mr. Corbeyne, she was informed, had left for his chambers. Miss Fellowes was still at work. Sylvia, on an impulse, turned into the small room which had been made the secretary's office.

The secretary was not there. Sylvia hesitated. She was inclined to like Miss Fellowes; she was more than inclined to admire her. Never would that one moment of her own appalling misjudgment be blotted from Sylvia's mind; that Miss Fellowes was quite unconscious of that passing suspicion mattered nothing. Sylvia, apart from her liking and admiration, would always see to it that she was specially nice to Miss Fellowes.

She went into the study, therefore, in search of her.

Miss Fellowes was at John Corbeyne's desk. She was sitting in his chair, her hands loosely clasped upon a pile of papers, her fine eyes fixed on vacancy. So still she sat that Sylvia felt herself an intruder and contemplated retreat. While she hovered, Miss Fellowes' hand moved slightly and touched a tobacco pouch that lay, half-open, near a battered looking pipe.

Sylvia watched the hand, fascinated. It lingered on the pouch, curled round the pipe, stroking it softly. The girl's eyes were still intent upon their visions. . . .

Sylvia tried to slip away. She felt as though she had seen a soul at prayer. . . . Her skirt brushed against the door and Miss Fellowes swung round in the chair.

"Oh, Miss Fellowes, I'm disturbing you. I'm sorry!" Sylvia hoped she was looking as though they had only just caught sight of each other, but Miss Fellowes flushed deeply as she rose.

"I've finished for the day, Mrs. Corbeyne. I was just idling."

Sylvia respected that. She herself, she thought, would have pretended to be looking for a paper or something. She respected, too, the steadiness of the eyes and the courage in the voice.

"Mr. Corbeyne left half-an-hour ago. Shall I——"

"It was you I wanted to see, Miss Fellowes. I am so grateful to you for helping us the other day by keeping Mr. Deagle tucked away somewhere while my husband was applying for the injunction to restrain publication of *The Plain Man*. Lord Carfax told me you and he conspired together, and of course I'm consumed with curiosity to know how you did it."

She leant back in her chair and smiled up into the secretary's beautiful eyes. The eyes smiled back at her.

"I did very little. Merely hung about outside Mr. Deagle's office and when he appeared murmured a telephone number in his ear that made him uneasy. He tried rather clumsily to persuade me to say more, and so I hailed a sympathetic policeman and gave 'the old gentleman who was molesting me' in charge. The rest of the affair took long enough for Lord Carfax to be able to arrange the compromise he wanted."

"Oh, good!" breathed Sylvia gaily. "I wish I could think of simple, effective things like that. My brain works so ponderously, like a man's."

Miss Fellowes looked down at the littered writing table.

"A man's brain is the best kind, though, in the end," she said. "To see one issue clearly, and nothing else; to live for it and perhaps to be destroyed for it—that seems to me a happier thing than to realise too much. Women mix things, don't you think? They think they exist for one thing, and then they find the one thing is really something else, something they didn't ask for. It's—humiliating."

Sylvia was silent, her eyes on the averted face. She understood that she was being told, very honestly, that here was a woman who had come to love the worker, instead of the work. She was being given an opening to express her own wishes in the matter. If she were to say something vague about the drastic remedy of a clean cut and a fresh start, Miss Fellowes would hand John Corbeyne her resignation to-morrow.

But Sylvia didn't want to. Why shouldn't Vera Fellowes love the man Sylvia Corbeyne loved? The pity lay only in that it must bring sorrow to this attractive girl. Sylvia studied the lines of the expressive face. Ah, love *had* brought sorrow already. The lips hinted at loneliness. . . .

"I don't think you would ever be humiliated," she said gently. "You are much too strong to waste your strength. You control it, I think, and force yourself to spend it on what you want to want."

Vera Fellowes laughed shakily.

"I want to want, above all things, that the Ministry of Credit may save the country from financial ruin. But I find myself wanting—other things."

She was facing Sylvia again. The colour had left her face altogether; the brave, beautiful eyes were dark with renunciation. Sylvia rose and came towards her. She found herself stumbling over her words.

"It doesn't matter; don't worry. When you stand up to things they change, somehow, and they change into something easier." She shook her head impatiently, conscious of the inadequacy of her consolation.

"I can't explain—but I've found it so, that change. Or perhaps it's we who change. . . . Anyway, don't worry. And don't leave—John. He would be so greatly set back in his fight if he hadn't got you to turn to."

"You are most amazingly kind; but it isn't quite true to say that he would suffer if I went away," said Miss Fellowes dully. "He would have you."

"But——" Sylvia felt oddly shy of a sudden—"I can't help him, as you can, to what he wants above all things—the success of his Ministry."

The secretary raised her head quickly.

"But his work is only what he wants to want," she said almost fiercely. "He really only wants you. He would give his life for you. Don't you know that?"

"I——" Sylvia stammered and was silent. Miss Fellowes drew her hand across her eyes.

"You must forgive me, Mrs. Corbeyne. I'm very tired. I have been impertinent."

"You've been magnificent," said Sylvia from her heart. "You—you've given me what I most wanted, and I can't give you anything in exchange, except my friendship. It's very little to give, but—I haven't many real friends."

"Friendship!" repeated Miss Fellowes, "yes, I should like to be your friend. I should like to warn you, Mrs. Corbeyne."

"Warn me!"

"Yes; warn you not to let your husband's work become to him the only issue. He tries to believe it is that now, but he doesn't quite succeed. Soon he will quite succeed; and soon after that he will have made the belief into reality and nothing *will* matter but his work."

"Do you think, then, that I don't love him?"

"I don't know what to think about you," said Miss Fellowes simply.

Sylvia shook herself together.

"I can't explain myself or John or anything to you, just now. Perhaps some day, when things have come right, you will listen to me. It's such a strange tangle. . . . And there is someone else involved."

"Another woman."

"How did you know?"

"I guessed. I have no wish to pry, but there is always another woman, isn't there?—if there isn't another man. If I were you, Mrs. Corbeyne, I should be afraid of that other woman."

"Oh, no! She's utterly futile."

Miss Fellowes gazed out into the garden.

"That is why I think you should be afraid of her. Women who are not utterly futile—like me—well, you give your friendship and pass on. But the clinging type, the vacillating, impulsive type, they work havoc with men like John Corbeyne. They do something to the will-power—suck it away. And men are quite helpless in their hands."

Sylvia was silent. It was on her lips to refute it all, but an insistent memory stayed her; the memory that John had once been infatuated with Katherine Brierly, and married her. . . .

"Men pigeon-hole their mentality," Miss Fellowes continued, as if to herself. "They keep one desire quite apart from another. There are sides of John Corbeyne I've never seen and you have; and the other way round. And there may be sides this other woman has called out that we know nothing of."

"Does that matter, though?"

Miss Fellowes made no answer, but Sylvia could answer herself. Katherine would creep and wait, and take her advantage, and then call on John's chivalry. . . .

The discovery of the man who had impersonated Lord Henry Graunham seemed suddenly a remote possibility, a treacherous promise of security.

Miss Fellowes went quietly away.

"I wish she weren't unhappy," thought Sylvia, still standing idly by the writing-table, but immediately the wish merged into—"I'm so glad she's sure it's me John still cares for most. Oh, I must help him out of all this trouble. I must, I must! And make up to him for the misery he's endured, and strengthen him and comfort him and make him well again. . . .

"*I must find out more about the woman herself,*" came the sudden thought. "Why not try Ealing?"

In Ealing there were possibilities, if nothing else. The memory of a speech of Katherine's was present in her mind. "I didn't hate John so long as he set me right with people who'd been beasts to me." The conversation had been all about Ealing. The people who had been "beasts" to her had presumably been beasts to her some time ago. At Ealing she might have acquired a history.

Sylvia had obtained the address of the maisonnette from the egregious editor of *The Plain Man*. That in itself was not now of much use to her. The possession of that fact could be regarded merely as a spring-board.

A local directory gave her the name of all the tenants in the same road. One name only had any significance for her—the name of Pelt. It was listed as "Pelt, Mrs."

Sylvia went up to her bedroom and summoned her maid.

"Stamford, will you lend me a coat and skirt—and a hat?"

"Lend? Yes, madam, certainly." Stamford was never really surprised. She bustled off to get the things. "And this blouse, madam," she added, returning. "None of yours are at all the kind of thing I should wear."

Sylvia dressed carefully. She thought the effect rather good—ready-made without being at all nasty.

Stamford's smile indicated that her shining hair, her hands, her slenderness would all give her away, but she said nothing. She was by nature discreet.

Sylvia took the train to Ealing. It helped her into the rôle she had in mind. By the time she knocked on Mrs. Pelt's door, she was sure of herself.

"Good evening," she said as Mrs. Pelt, with one shoulder against the door, looked her up and down and inquired her business.

"Mrs. Pelt, I presume?" began Sylvia. "I—know someone who met your husband recently."

"My husband has been dead fifteen years," said Mrs. Pelt without humour.

The explanation dawned upon Sylvia.

"Oh, then perhaps it was your brother-in-law?"

"If it's my son you mean, who's secretary to Mr. Catlett, he's in the City now——"

"That's the one I mean," said Sylvia. "Fancy his being your son!"

Sylvia marvelled at the vanity that could be pleased by that kind of thing. Incidentally she had learnt that Mr. Pelt was not in the house, which would make it quite safe for her to give a false name.

"I am Mrs. Baxter," she explained. "We have a mutual acquaintance, Mrs. Pelt, and I have really called to ask whether you or Mr. Pelt could tell me her whereabouts. I thought she was still here in Ealing, but she seems to have moved. I mean Mrs. Brierly."

"Come in, Mrs. Baxter," invited Mrs. Pelt. Two minutes later Sylvia was ensconced in the "drawing-room," a place of plush and aspidistras.

"Though, mind you," continued Mrs. Pelt, "I know absolutely nothing about Mrs. Brierly. Absolutely nothing. She's here to-day and gone to-morrow and not leaving any address with the tradesmen, though I'll admit she didn't run away from her bills as far as we know at present."

"Ah!" said Sylvia vaguely. She perceived that her task would be easy, though it might lead nowhere.

"I know nothing about the woman, as I've told you," insisted Mrs. Pelt. "And a month ago I wouldn't have heard a word against her. In fact I came down quite sharp on my own son when he brought out a tale about her which I wouldn't soil your ears, Mrs. Baxter, by repeating."

"Dear me!" said Sylvia, and sighed. "Tell me, Mrs. Pelt, have you ever met her husband?"

"Have I?" repeated Mrs. Pelt. Have I? That's a question you're as likely to be able to answer as me, as I understood you to say she's an acquaintance of yours. If you're meaning to ask whether I've seen a man who she said was her husband, then I can say 'Yes' without fear of uttering a falsehood."

"But surely," protested Sylvia, contriving to look puzzled. "I don't think I quite follow you, Mrs. Pelt. The Brierlys lived here some years ago, didn't they?"

"They did, Mrs. Baxter."

"Did you not see Mr. Brierly then?"

"Everything *but*," replied Mrs. Pelt, which left Sylvia genuinely guessing. Fortunately for her Mrs. Pelt continued. "We knew his taste in ties, his favourite pudding, and what he used to say when callers came unexpected, but we didn't see him not until the other day, as you might almost say, if it *was* him, that is."

Sylvia disentangled it. The information so far was of an entirely negative nature. Nevertheless, from the whirl of negatives one positive fact had emerged. Katherine had protested that there was a Mr. Brierly long before she had called upon John Corbeyne to fill the part. "I admit that I have never met Mr. Brierly," said Sylvia, "though I, too, have heard a good deal about him. I wonder if we have been told the same story. Was the Mr. Brierly you heard about an—er—ex-officer of the Guards?"

"I'm not saying that he wasn't," said Mrs. Pelt, enjoying herself immensely. "Only if he was, all I can say is it must have been before he went in the silk trade, which took him to New Zealand, which was why he couldn't come home to his wife as he was doing so well and it would be a pity to break the connection, and in a few years he'd have made enough not to have to worry."

"Silk trade in New Zealand?" repeated Sylvia, shaking her head as if she found it hard to believe.

"Oh, there's no mistake about what we were told," said Mrs. Pelt. "There's Mrs. Tuckey, Fairfield View, who'll tell you just the same. Lessee, now, what was that place he went to—it's named after the road that comes up from the station—Auckland, that's it. Well, as you can understand, we were all somewhat curious to see this husband of hers what we'd heard so much about. One lady said so a little too pointedly to Mrs. Brierly, so she took herself off and none of us ever saw her again until a matter of a month or so ago when she took a furnished maisonnette with her husband—as she said. A nice enough looking man he was and well-spoken, though too stand-offish for my liking—he'd got that deceitful look about the eyes which I always mistrust. Well, three weeks ago last Thursday they were here and they were gone, as I told you. And then my son came out with his story that Mrs. Brierly was living under a false name and that he was really a gentleman in the Royal Circle. As I tell you, I didn't believe it. I said so. I said if the Royal Circle couldn't do better than a bad-tempered gadabout like Mrs. Brierly, well, I'm sorry for them. Not that I know anything about such goings-on, but I've read a bit—and then there's the pictures, isn't there? So what with one thing and another, I thought no, I've wronged Mrs. Brierly once when she was here before, and I don't mind owning up to it. Now this second time I'll give her

the benefit of the doubt. And then——” Mrs. Pelt paused impressively, “Mrs. Baxter, do you read *The Plain Man?*”

Sylvia said she did not, and resigned herself to being shown the paragraph that had become so odiously familiar.

“Next week,” said Mrs. Pelt, with horrible delight, “fresh revelations. Well, we shall see what we shall see. But one thing’s certain, that woman won’t set foot in Ealing any more—is it likely? And you can believe me or not, my son Robert’s had something to do with getting this bit into the paper. He won’t say he has, and he won’t say he hasn’t, but you can’t deceive a mother. Now, let me make you a cupper tea, Mrs. Baxter.”

Sylvia refused, and got away, somehow. She hurried along the road drinking in the fresh air and the sunshine. Had John sat in that awful room, too, and listened to such talk about other people?

She almost ran into the station.

‘I believe there’s a real “Mr. Brierly,”’ ran her thoughts. ‘And somehow I am going to find him.’

CHAPTER XXXVII

PLAYING FOR TIME

THERE followed for Sylvia days of an almost feverish activity in pursuit of her goal. She had as her allies Bayliss and Rason, with whom she had been put in touch by Sowerby and Grand.

Latterly she had assumed the rôle of leader—invariably, in that she alone held to the belief in ultimate success. Rason would follow her lead with energy, but, as she knew well, without faith.

Facts were accumulating—but all too slowly.

She was with Rason when the Bill came before the House for the Second Reading. She was not there to share Corbeyne's triumph. She did not know it had passed until she received a note from Miss Fellowes.

On the following day she did nothing, knowing that the Second Reading had precipitated a crisis in their affairs. At her solitary lunch she ate and drank mechanically, and was aware of Woodhams' sympathy. He had been sympathetic for weeks and weeks now.

. . . And suddenly she was consumed with a longing that it should be over, this intriguing and pretending and arranging. Oh, she was sick of it—sick of it all! "But you are deliberately prolonging it," she reminded herself; "you could go to him now and tell him you know all that he thinks he has kept hidden from you; that you know *more* than he does, for you know there is

a chance—a bare chance—of escape from it all. You could tell him what you've been doing these last few days, and discuss it with him and hearten him—and—and explain why you insisted on Jim's ridiculous pretence that he was not John Corbeyne, but a man amazingly like him. . . .”

“She stared before her, hearing and seeing nothing but the scene of reconciliation she was picturing. She felt his arms about her, their kisses and tears. . . . Just for that moment they would cling together, they would know again the overwhelming joy of their love. Then, unless the bare chance of escape offered itself, and “Brierly” were discovered, then the misery of publicity; the futile libel action against *The Plain Man*, serving but as a preliminary to the intricacies of the suit which Katherine was bringing. . . .

Again there was a chance of safety; Katherine might lose her action. “But the publicity will have killed John's career and life will never give him anything in place of it. And if Katherine wins the case, the Jobber will be illegitimate—and I shall resent it, in my heart. I shall fight not to be, but deep down I shall be bitter”

“A note, madam.”

“Woodhams, apparently, had been proffering it for some seconds. Sylvia took it and read it.

“*Obliged if you will see me in the study at six—important.*”

It was unsigned. When, as on such occasion as this, he had sent her such notes, he had invariably left them unsigned. She knew that he shrank from the absurdity of signing the name of “Brierly.” While she looked at the note thus pondering there came a flash of recognition that this would be the last time his signature would embarrass him. At six o'clock in the study John intended to end the pantomime.

Immediately the pendulum swung back in Sylvia's mind. This moment of revelation, on which she had

but just now brooded, must be held off for a little longer. To meet it now would be to meet it prematurely. When she knew certainly that her search for Brierly had failed, then it would be time enough to lay aside her mask. But until then, with the bare chance glimmering just ahead, she must be left to work on alone. "I could bear the awful disappointment of failure. I don't think John could, after all he's been through. I think it would kill him."

She put on the plain little frock in which she thought she looked least attractive, and went to the office of the wise Miss Fellowes; but the secretary was not working at Corbeyne House that day. Sylvia wandered into the study and sat down to think it over.

She was there when he came in some quarter of an hour before his time.

She had not seen him since their last talk about Deagle. That had been before the Second Reading. She remembered with a sudden misgiving that she had forgotten to send him an explanation of her absence from the House. But perhaps he had not noticed.

"Oh—ah—I'm glad you're here," he said awkwardly. That told her nothing. He had always been gauche in the preliminaries of an interview—with anyone but herself. She had seen people mistake that *gaucherie* for nervousness, to their cost. Sylvia knew that she was the one who was nervous.

"Yes, I got your note," she said, and stopped. His *gaucherie* was infecting herself. The masque had lasted already too long—she was growing stale in her part—but it must last just a little longer. . . .

She watched him move restlessly about the room. She hoped he would not sit at his desk, because if he insisted on forcing the denouement just now, she would feel so awkward, so much like an applicant for a post. . . . He stopped before the mantelpiece and leant against it, looking down at her. She did not dare to meet his eyes.

"I—I feel as though you wanted to discuss things," she said breathlessly. "And I would so much rather wait a little if you don't mind. Just for a week or so——"

His tone told her that she had startled him.

"Isn't delay rather pointless? Circumstances won't improve," said Corbeyne dryly. "This seems to me a good opportunity of reviewing what we have done and—what we shan't be given time to do. The International Credit Bill is practically certain to pass into law. At the Second Reading it secured a quite substantial majority—as no doubt you saw in the Press."

That told her he had noticed her absence from the House. She looked up and found his gaze inscrutable.

"I didn't read it in the Press," she answered. "I got the information from Miss Fellowes. I had a pressing duty which prevented my coming to the house to hear your speech."

Corbeyne smiled with his lips.

"I'm afraid that sounds suspiciously like an apology," he said, forcing a laugh. "I assure you there is no need. There was no reason at all why you should have been in the House. And now, of course, the whole thing is ancient history. . . . Well, as to the future. You know of *The Plain Man* quarrel, and I have hinted to you that I am involved in another case which threatens my private life—and through mine yours—and it's this second and much greater menace that we must discuss, whatever my own reluctance and your—somewhat capricious—unwillingness."

"I claim the right to be capricious occasionally," put in Sylvia, concerned only with the necessity for that week's delay. "I don't often exercise it, but now I very much want to." She broke off, seeking for some other way of phrasing it. "You have said all along when speaking of your enemies, that you would only hope to play for time with them. Time in which

to set up machinery that would go on revolving after you were no longer responsible for it. You meant by that more than the International Credit Bill, didn't you?"

"Certainly. That's been a big thing—a big success—but there's unending work to be done, and I intend to stick at it until the very last possible instant. You see, Deagle and men like him want to wipe me out because I block their way. The next Minister of Credit mightn't prove such an obstacle. My hope is to get work done before I'm beaten off which will make it difficult to corrupt the next man, difficult for him to be corrupted."

"Yes, yes!" she said quickly. "That is what I thought you intended. All I ask of you as well is that you wait until you are—beaten off—before going into matters with me."

He turned and fidgeted with an old Italian candlestick that stood on the mantelshelf.

"You are making things extremely difficult," he said in a low voice. "When one has keyed oneself up—to be put off——"

Sylvia caught her breath.

"I know," she admitted. "I can only ask your indulgence. I can't explain my reasons for the request."

"You don't realise perhaps," said Corbeyne, his face still averted, "that this last moment of which we speak may be upon us to-day—to-morrow. When I planned to play for time, I underestimated the power, the influence of my chief adversary."

"Deagle?"

"Yes. He has speeded up things enormously. He—I—but unless you will let me lay everything before you I can't——"

Again Sylvia cut in.

"You seem to have taken it for granted that while you were piloting your Bill through the House I was

at a *thé dansant* or something." He swung round, surprised by her irrelevance.

"I am sorry you labour that very trifling incident," he said. "It really has nothing to do with the—the future."

"To me it seems vital," said Sylvia. "If you think I was absent from the House through sheer indifference, then you are quite right in refusing to allow me a voice in the arrangement of our affairs. On the other hand, if you are still willing to think of me as your collaborator, or, as I believe Lord Carfax calls it, a fellow conspirator—then I think you are morally bound to give me a chance."

"Chance?" he echoed. "Chance of what?"

"My chance of making Deagle and *The Plain Man* afraid to come into court and face your action for libel."

As she spoke she watched his eyes. For a perilous moment she saw them hover between ridicule and toleration. Toleration won. As it was all she could get she took it and was thankful.

"I do not propose to interfere in any work you may have been kind enough to undertake on my behalf," said Corbeyne formally. "Though I am utterly bewildered as to what——"

She raised a hand in protest.

"Please—trust me. Give me a week; longer if you can."

"Very well."

She rose.

"I shall have to be in Paris for the next few days," he added. "I shall have to settle a small dispute that has arisen there."

"Oh, good!" said Sylvia absently, her hand on the door. His look interrogated her, and she felt herself blushing. She would not retreat, however. "It suits me very well that you should be out of the way for a little," she told him defiantly and saw him smile in

spite of himself. She closed the study door smartly behind her.

For a moment they had been very near to their life together as it lived in their memories. So often she had been "impudent," and he had adored it . . . Sylvia's cheeks were still flushed as she ran upstairs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE SWEETS OF DISREPUTE

IN the days that followed Corbeyne's last visit Katherine lived in a mist of melancholy, broken by moods of violent resentment and again by brief, tearful periods of self-reproach.

In that interview, for the first time in his life, Corbeyne had really hurt her. In her angry confusion caused by the intervention of Mr. Pelt, she had forced him to defend himself with brutal clarity. He had destroyed her illusion that had taken shape in the half-light of her crude emotionalism that she had been on the verge of rekindling his desire for her. He had told her with an absence of any kind of feeling that her society stood for him as a penalty that he was content to pay for the sake of his work and for the sake of Sylvia and the child. Katherine saw her love, her solicitude, her pretty familiarities, not as a balm to him, not as an anodyne, but as a punishment which he was prepared to bear manfully.

The vanity that had inspired and coloured her existence, tingeing it with romance and a certain happiness, was now stunned. Only the deadening trivialities of her life remained. Deep draughts of self-pity failed to sustain her. With melancholy came a listlessness that had been unpierced by the visit of Sylvia Corbeyne.

Once a day she received a telephone message from

Deagle's agent. At first these messages had stimulated her. They brought on the mood of violent resentment, and for an hour or more afterwards she would fling herself about the room, muttering, laughing, as she pictured Corbeyne driven to her at the last moment to beg her to stay her hand.

At the end of a fortnight these messages lost their stimulating effect. They were invariably brief and invariably they pointed the moral of the slowness of the law and adjured her to rest assured that everything was being done with the utmost efficiency and the utmost speed. In the meantime, if she wanted any money, she was to be sure to say so.

A picture newspaper was dropped through her letter-box every morning, but as she never read the political news she did not know of the passing of the Bill at its Second Reading, nor would it have conveyed anything to her if she had read of it. She was profoundly indifferent to Corbeyne's political work. She cared only that he had humiliated her.

She thought little of Sylvia as a person. She was a mere factor that would assist in the destruction of Corbeyne. On the Saturday after the Second Reading inquiries at her bank revealed that Sylvia had not cut off the allowance.

"She's trying to make friends," was Katherine's interpretation thereof. "She thinks I can be bought. I've a good mind to return it just to show."

There were difficulties in the way of returning the last two weeks' instalments of the allowance, difficulties that were never surmounted. She wrapped herself in the gloom that she had created and gave herself over to the demon of loneliness. She made the disconcerting discovery that her maid was not of the garrulous type, so that even that possible outlet for the social instinct was denied her.

It was the loneliness that made her jump at the chance of a talk with Mrs. Tuckey and Mrs. Pelt.

Added to the loneliness was the fear of the unknown. The wrath of that tiny circle at Ealing had become formidable through its silence—formidable and a great deal more than a little fascinating. What were they saying about her? Did they know all or part of the truth? Whatever the state of their ignorance or knowledge, did they know that the man, whatever else they thought about him, was indisputably a Member of Parliament and a Minister?

She was lying down when the maid brought her the news that they were at the door.

"Show them into the drawing-room and say that I'll be with them in a few minutes," ordered Katherine. She thrust herself off her bed in a whirlwind of excitement. "Light the gas-fire and bring in tea at once—the rest of that Genoa cake cut up small and those meringues I was going to have for dinner."

What had they come for? What did they expect her to say—to do? Katherine opened her wardrobe with shaking fingers and took out a plain dark silk dress with a touch of white. She'd put it on—she'd look severely respectable—she'd make them feel awkward, and then tell them about the case that was coming on that was going to establish her as Mrs. Corbeyne, the wife of a Cabinet Minister, and they'd stay and curry favour with her, very likely. She shook the dress from its hanger and another fell to the floor of the wardrobe.

It was of apricot tulle with grapes at one side, almost an evening gown. She looked splendid in it, she considered, like an actress—like someone who mattered. It'd take their breath away if she—and she could always tell them she'd been joking—after the case had been won.

She put on the apricot tulle.

She received her first glow of pleasure as she noticed an exchange of glances between the two callers and a movement of unmistakable nervousness on the part

of Mrs. Tuckey. Both ladies were standing in the centre of the carpet.

"I'm very glad to see you, Mrs. Pelt, and you, Mrs. Tuckey. Pray be seated." She did not offer her hand as she knew her Ealing well enough to suspect that they might have called for the express purpose of refusing it. "I don't mind admitting that I really thought that neither of you would speak to me again now that you know about me, but now I wish I'd confided in you from the first, for it would have been such a comfort!"

"Then it's *true*?" challenged Mrs. Pelt.

Katherine slowly raised one finger.

"Just one moment, if you please, Mrs. Pelt, because my parlourmaid will be in with the tea any minute. Oh, I forgot! It's her day off and my cook is doing her work for her, and I only hope she didn't keep you waiting on the doorstep, for her manner with callers is dreadful. Only the other day——"

At that moment the tea-tray was brought in. Mrs. Tuckey remarked upon the height of the flat and surmised that the air must be remarkably pure. Whatever else Ealing might think of Katherine, they would never dispute the soundness of silence before the servant. In Ealing there is a perpetual conspiracy of silence in the presence of servants—that never succeeds.

Mrs. Pelt, with gloating curiosity, let her eyes wander over the room. Her expression said that at last, at last she had penetrated into a lair of sin. That divan, that palm—it was exactly like what the "Pictures" had led her to expect.

Katherine officiated with the tea-pot.

"I know you like it strong, Mrs. Tuckey, and after that long journey in the Underground I expect you're dying for a cup. You must let me send you back in my car, I'll telephone to the garage presently and tell them to get it ready." It was worth two guineas, reflected Katherine.

"Thank you, Mrs. Brierly, but, speaking for myself, I'm not used to motoring," said Mrs. Tuckey feebly, "and I prefer the Underground."

"Just as you like, of course," said Katherine with the utmost amiability. Nothing now could shake her pose. She had the centre of the stage and could hold it to an audience that liked nothing better than being impressed. Mrs. Pelt, Katherine told herself, was getting ready to let off steam.

"Before I drink your tea, Mrs. Brierly," began Mrs. Pelt, "it's only fair I should tell you that I've come here to find out whether you care to give an explanation that some people in Ealing think is badly needed."

Mrs. Tuckey, with some reluctance, also put down her cup and waited.

"You refer to me and Mr. Corbeyne?" asked Katherine grandly. She ran over her retort in her mind—it had flashed upon the screen at a near-by picture-house not long since. "It explains itself, doesn't it? We care for each other—the opinion of the world matters nothing to us—if you are able to understand the meaning of a love that can defy convention—you are more than welcome to our home."

Mrs. Pelt glared at her tea-cup. It had been a mistake to take a stand in the matter of drinking tea. She had already received a flat confirmation of the worst report, and she badly wanted to hear more. Mrs. Pelt sipped her tea. Mrs. Tuckey instantly followed suit.

"Then you're—you're *living* with Mr. Corbeyne?" asked Mrs. Tuckey.

Katherine lowered her head very slowly.

"I am content to accept the taunt and leave it unanswered, Mrs. Tuckey," she said. The cinema had inspired that, too.

There was a silence in which Katherine hugged to herself the knowledge that her callers were thrilled as they had never been thrilled before. She knew that

questions would soon be poured upon her—knew that Ealing always insisted upon having a taunt answered in detail.

“How long has it been going on?” asked Mrs. Tuckey.

“For years,” answered Katherine.

“Before you go any further,” put in Mrs. Pelt, “I’d just like to ask you how much truth there is in what you told us about Mr. Brierly being in New Zealand. Is there a Mr. Brierly? And was he ever in New Zealand?”

With a vague memory of a famous Academy picture Katherine slipped into a kneeling position by the hearth, so that the glow from the gas stove “played upon her face.”

“I had to shield the man I loved, Mrs. Pelt, so long as my love spelt ruin to his great career, and if I’ve injured you by doing that, I’m sure I beg your pardon in all——” Katherine chased a suitable word that was like “humbleness” but not quite the same, and gave it up. “I’m as sorry as you are,” she concluded.

“I don’t know that there’s anything to beg our pardons for, since you put it like that,” said Mrs. Tuckey, responding to the kneeling attitude and the bent head. “It seems to me you couldn’t help yourself once you’d made up your mind to take the plunge, as the saying is.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Tuckey!” said Katherine, and touched Mrs. Tuckey’s knee. Katherine’s voice quavered a little. “Yet in a way, you know, if you’d been disdainful and—drawn your skirts away from me—I would have found it easier to bear than your forgiving me like this, for you can’t think how mean I felt when I was compelled to deceive you, and it used to prey upon my mind till I could stand it no longer, and one night I said: ‘John,’ I said, ‘I can stand this no longer. I won’t pretend that we’re not doing what we are. I will leave here, and we can have a flat in

London and anyone can say what they like about us.' 'As you please, Kathie,' he said—he always calls me Kathie, and—we came here.

"Don't think that I am sorry for anything I have done," continued Katherine with rising eloquence. "If it's a sin to love, I have sinned, but I have been punished for my sin, for just think what it means for me to sit here and know that the man I love has to steel his heart and pretend to be enjoying himself, now at a Court Ball, now at some State dinner with Princes and Ambassadors, and all the time there is that other woman by his side when he longs to break away and just sit here and smoke in the firelight and forget all the cares of his high office."

Mrs. Pelt sniffed as she realised that Mrs. Tuckey was getting all the limelight.

"What will Mrs. Baxter say when she knows the truth I should like to know?" asked Mrs. Pelt.

"Mrs. Baxter?" repeated Katherine, in the absent tone of a spiritualistic medium. "I don't know the name. Some friend of yours at Ealing, perhaps?"

"A friend of *yours*, she said," Mrs. Pelt retorted. "At least if you won't think me rude she spoke of you as 'Mrs. Brierly.' She seemed to have got it into her head that you had a husband who'd been in the Guards."

Katherine was genuinely puzzled.

"I think she must have thought I was somebody else."

"Oh dear no!" said Mrs. Pelt. "She knew you was a friend of m—— She knew you and I knew each other when you were in Ealing both times and she came to me to make inquiries. She knew a great deal about you I should say, though she owned up she had never set eyes on your husband—which it's no wonder after what you've just been telling us. How would she have known about you knowing us in a manner of speaking if you was someone else of the same name?"

Katherine was being challenged. Her veracity was being called into question. It was one thing to confess to a romantic deception, another to be caught out with a tarradiddle. Unless she were careful her afternoon would be spoilt. And who on earth *was* "Mrs. Baxter?"

"It's evidently someone who knows me and gave you a false name," she began, still at a loss. "That's quite likely, though you mightn't think it, Mrs. Pelt, because I assure you it's one of the penalties of John's position that there are so many who seek unceasingly to oust me by fair means or foul, and I've no doubt this woman whoever she was tried to lead you into giving her a weapon to use against me with John."

"It does seem as though it might be when you come to think of it, doesn't it?" came from Mrs. Tuckey.

Katherine pressed her advantage.

"Am I at liberty to ask, Mrs. Pelt, whether you unknowingly gave her what she wanted?"

"I didn't give her anything," replied Mrs. Pelt. "She talked about you when you were at Ealing before and asked me if I had met your husband. I told her all you had told me about him being in the silk trade in New Zealand."

Katherine's hand shot to her cheek in a gesture of alarm. She had studied the gesture from a film. It was used to register the realisation of sudden danger. In Katherine's case it was partly genuine. Katherine had made a guess. In all her life she had encountered no woman who would be likely to make inquiries about her former life at Ealing—except Sylvia Corbeyne.

She was alarmed, but not too alarmed to turn the occasion to good account.

"If you will wait a moment, Mrs. Pelt, I think I shall be able to give you a surprise in connection with your caller—er—the lady who calls herself Mrs. Baxter, I think you said." Katherine laughed slowly and long.

"Mrs. Bax—— Oh, I shan't keep you a minute!"

She took care to turn at the door so that they could see how the grapes were placed against her girdle. She went melodramatically from the room. When she returned she was carrying a copy of an illustrated society weekly. She flicked on the electric light, spread the paper out, and pointed to a full page photograph. She kept her hand over the description at the bottom of the photo.

"Was *that* your 'Mrs. Baxter,' Mrs. Pelt?"

Mrs. Pelt stared at the photo.

"That's her," she exclaimed. "The hat's different, I *will* say, but I'd know her anywhere."

"Who is she?" asked Mrs. Tuckey breathlessly.

"You ask who is she, Mrs. Tuckey," said Katherine, now in the seventh heaven. "I will tell you. *That*"—she dropped her hand from the underline—"is the Woman Who Stands Between."

"Mrs. Corbeyne, the wife of the new Minister of Credit, who has long been known as one of London's most beautiful hostesses," read Mrs. Tuckey, with that in her voice which compensated Katherine for much that she had endured.

"You will see now, Mrs. Pelt, why this woman laid herself out to fool you with a false name and a false story—so's she could learn something to my discredit, and seeing p'raps that it was easy to get you to say all you knew——"

It was not a very wise way of putting it. Katherine was laughing at Mrs. Pelt's gullibility—in the presence of Mrs. Tuckey. Mrs. Pelt did not let it pass.

"She didn't need to come to me to learn that, Mrs. Brierly, for as far as I can see she knew it already. When you was talking jest now you didn't say anything about Mr. Corbeyne having a wife—at least if you did all I can say is I didn't hear it. It seems to me that that's a very different pair of shoes. I'm not saying as there can't be circumstances that'll excuse a woman doing what you've done if it's going to ruin the man,

but when it means coming between him and his lawful wedded wife——”

Katherine's mind jerked back to that plain dark dress in the wardrobe with its touches of white. It would have been better, after all, to have worn it. . . . Mentally she was putting it on now, smoothing its severe folds. . . .

“Really, Mrs. Pelt, I'm surprised at you—that you think things like that—that you should suspect that I—er—lured a man from a woman who had every right to him, well, *reely*! P'raps you'll be interested to know that I *was* John Corbeyne's first wife, and in a very few months I shall be his wife again, as I could prove, if I cared to tell you my story, but as you've already condemned me as a heartless vampire——”

“Not at all, Mrs.—er—er——” floundered Mrs. Tuckey. “Nothing of the sort entered my mind. And I'm sure if there's anything you feel you could tell us——”

Katherine felt she could tell them a great deal.

As the tale progressed, Mrs. Tuckey had need of her handkerchief, and the opposition of Mrs. Pelt diminished to vanishing point. Dramatically speaking, Katherine made only one mistake—she overproved her case.

There was a long silence as she finished, which was eventually broken by Mrs. Pelt.

“Well, I don't know what Mrs. Tuckey thinks, but I for one, whether I'm saying wrong or not, I for one think you've every right to do what you're doing. And if I was you, though Mrs. Tuckey may think very differently, and everyone's a right to her opinion, if I was you I'd go on doing it. I'd leave things as they are, I *reely* would, and if I was you I wouldn't go to law, for it'd be hard lines on that woman's child, and wouldn't do good to no one as far as I can see.”

Katherine perceived that the trend of sympathy was in danger of heading in the wrong direction.

"That's what I've tried to do," she answered. "That's what I've succeeded in doing up to now, but now a change has come, now that I can't see him often enough as things are, and I must see him more. . . . My nerves are beginning to make me so jumpy and fanciful I. . . . It's my—my state of health——"

A simultaneous gasp broke from the two members of the audience.

"You poor dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Pelt. "Here, sit down on the sofa, dearie, you're tired."

She turned to Mrs. Tuckey.

"I'll give that woman a piece of my mind. I'll Mrs. Baxter her!" she exclaimed viciously.

"And I'll come with you and help you do it," said Mrs. Tuckey.

They propped Katherine up with cushions and a rug and, promising to run round again soon, left her to contemplate the turn things had taken.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE LIE

IN spite of the laboured climbing, step by thoughtful step, it seemed to Sylvia that the end of her work was reached suddenly.

It was in Rason's office and she hardly heard what he said. But she knew that he was telling her that the conspiracy was broken, that Deagle, *The Plain Man*, Katherine and her divorce tale were all a mere nightmare of the past—knew, too, that Bayliss was sitting next to Rason and that both were assuring her that it had all been her doing—that without her they would never have thought of looking for the real Mr. Brierly.

Suddenly she was tired of them. A queer thing was happening to her brain. It was as if she were awakening—as if all these weeks she had been in a trance and had now come back to life.

Presumably, she was taken home, prosaically, in her car. It appeared to her when she stood again in the privacy of her rooms, that she had been borne there by some rose-tinted cloud, driven by a languid yet rushing wind. She drew breath unsteadily; she felt as though she had come swooping down from heights where the air was like wine. "Excitement," she told herself shakily, "isn't good for me; but oh, how insanely splendid it all is!"

Security; sympathy; love. These lay like jewels in her heart, ready to be given back to him. A wedding-gift. . . .

Sylvia, the essentially modern woman—the keen, quick thinker whom Bayliss and Rason had congratulated and admired—Sylvia let glowing day-dreams sweep her away; Sylvia counted on her slim fingers the days she must wait before her man could return to her, and decided to go to bed early every night so as to make the time pass more quickly. . . .

“Mrs. Tuckey and Mrs. Pelt, madam.”

“Who, Stamford?” Sylvia was still half-attentive.

Stamford presented a salver. With impatience Sylvia glanced at the cards. She couldn’t see anyone just now. The name “Pelt” leapt up at her. Mrs. Pelt—how awkward! She must have discovered the identity of “Mrs. Baxter”; but what had she come here for?

“I don’t think——” began Sylvia, then paused. She didn’t want to receive Mrs. Pelt and her friend, but neither did she want to snub them after she had made use of them. “Very well: tell Woodhams to show them in the library; not the drawing-room.”

“They are in the library, madam.”

“Say I’ll be down in a minute, then; and find me a tea-frock.”

Five minutes later Sylvia ran downstairs. She felt no nervousness. What could these poor little people do to disturb such riotous happiness as was hers? She caught a glimpse of herself in a long mirror and saw that she looked radiant, gloriously and vitally young. . . .

The drabness of Mrs. Pelt and Mrs. Tuckey came as a shock; and yet they had obviously dressed themselves in their best. Sylvia bowed formally and saw that Corbeyne House had immensely overawed them both. They stared and fidgeted.

"You wished to see me?" she asked non-committally of Mrs. Pelt. "Please sit down."

They sat, cautiously and aggressively, on the edge of two straight-backed chairs. Sylvia wished she could make things easier for them even while she hoped they would blunder away with all possible speed. She did not understand that their muddleheadedness served them as courage.

"Mrs. Corbeyne—so-called?" asked Mrs. Pelt.

Sylvia reminded herself that she had no right to resent this kind of thing from them.

"I am Sylvia Corbeyne," she said quietly.

"That's as may be," returned Mrs. Pelt. "But at any rate you'll admit your name isn't Baxter?" Then, magnificently, as Sylvia nodded: "Then may I be permitted to ask why you passed yourself off as such to me when accepting the hospitality of my poor home?"

Sylvia's lips twitched.

"I wanted to find out all you could tell me about Mrs. Brierly," she admitted. "I apologise most sincerely for tricking you, but I saw no other way. It seemed to me that you wouldn't have confided in me if I had told you who I was."

"No, that I certainly wouldn't have," declared Mrs. Pelt, and Sylvia was surprised at the affronted earnestness of the tone. "To think that I was lured into seeming to take sides against that poor, deserted creature that has all the world against her when all the time she had only to say the word and all this"—Mrs. Pelt's tightly-gloved hand indicated the library, the garden outside, and Sylvia's soft grey draperies—"all this would be lawfully hers once more."

"Oh, I see! She's told you all about it," said Sylvia bluntly. "Well, I am not at liberty to go into details, but if you like to see my solicitor he will assure you that Mrs. Brierly is—let us say—mistaken in her statements. She was divorced by my husband and she

has no facts with which to challenge the decree. On the contrary, if she had told you the full truth, that would have been obvious to you."

She rose, looking at them impatiently, waiting for them to leave. She wanted to be alone with her dreams. She expected, judging their mentality by her own, that they would consider themselves answered now and go.

They settled themselves more grimly upon the edges of their chairs and Mrs. Tuckey took up the tale.

"That's *your* side of it, Mrs. Corbeyne, and I dessay with your lawyers and so on to advise you, you'll be given the right of it. Money can do anything, we all know that. But it can't alter some facts, only the look of them, and you can't make me and Mrs. Pelt here believe we were mistaken when we saw—well—your husband and Mrs. Brierly together at Ealing as happy and affectionate as you please."

Mrs. Pelt chorussed this vigorously.

"Ah! You can't get over the laws of the heart, Mrs. Corbeyne, whatever you may twist the laws of the land into. I know a loving couple when I see one and those two were almost next door to us for a full month. Used to break down and cry if he ever gave her a sharp word, Mrs. Brierly did, and you could see he thought the world of her, fetching her home the moment it was after ten and the way he'd look——"

"I am not interested in your reminiscences," cut in Sylvia in cold distaste. "My husband's affairs—and mine—are no concern of yours. Will you kindly——"

"Ho, aren't they? Well, they are, then!" exclaimed Mrs. Pelt. "Because they're Mrs. Brierly's affairs, and nothing'll make me believe you aren't wrecking her life because you want a man that's tired of you and gone back to her. If he didn't care about her why did he and she come to Ealing, answer me that!

And make no secret of being reg'lar love-birds, almost newly-weds, as you might say?"

"That's right. Reg'lar honey-moon couple they were, and would be now if you hadn't come between," corroborated Mrs. Tuckey. "Besides—circumstances alter cases."

"My husband has no feeling of the kind you describe for Mrs. Brierly," said Sylvia, white with anger. "If she let you think otherwise, she was lying again. And now please understand that I have no intention of discussing——"

"Circumstances alter cases," repeated Mrs. Tuckey. "It's not surprising to find you ignorant of them, for what d'you care for anything but your own selfish pleasures? As is proved by your talk of the law. What is that poor thing to do when you and the law have separated her and him forever, that were all in all to each other? And you a mother yourself!"

Sylvia was still standing and still looking down at them and still filled with a deadly hatred of these women and their beastly, *beastly* insinuations. But something else had crept into her mind; a memory. Someone—a girl—Miss Fellowes saying that the futile women were dangerous; that they brought out a side of a man's nature that in a clean straight life remained hidden; that they brought destruction. Destruction . . . of mind and will. . . . But not to a strong man, a man like John who could fight to the brutal end for his public honour. It was unthinkable that he should have let himself drift into contemplation of the moment only.

"Just when the poor dear soul thinks she's getting a little comfort and happiness after all these years, just when she has every reason to believe that she can claim to be considered more than other people——"

Was this Mrs. Pelt or Mrs. Tuckey droning now? How alike they were, and how like Katherine herself!

It was an insult to John to think that he would ever have slipped down to that level and not cared. . . . And yet men were so departmentalised in their outlook. And John had become "Mr. Brierly," as he thought, for ever. He might have taken a savage joy in smashing all his gods at once. . . .

"It isn't as though she'd made any fuss about it to us. Most resigned she was, I thought, didn't you, Mrs. Tuckey? Most unassuming when you think——"

"Will you please go?"

Sylvia was barely aware that she had said it. It mattered only that she should be free to beat off this shadow from the days ahead. Mrs. Pelt was crimson, Mrs. Tuckey's mouth was a little open; she looked very like a sheep.

They were sniffing. Sylvia had never actually heard anyone sniff before, but these women were both doing it. And they were both gathering up their skirts in an absurd way. And now they were both talking about the callousness of some people, and dear Kathie and her helplessness, and whatever was she going to do about it?

"Wait," commanded Sylvia, as mechanically as she had bidden them go. "Wait."

"Ordering us about like housemaids," was Mrs. Pelt's audible aside; but Mrs. Tuckey looked frightened.

"You have spoken to me about Mrs. Brierly as though you were her intimate friends; as though she had confided in you——"

"And so she has, with no one else to turn to——"

"She actually gave you to understand that—that she had—would have a claim on—him?"

"She did, didn't she, Mrs. Tuckey? She put it very nicely, I thought, considering."

"I see. Thank you. I see. Oh, I beg your pardon——." They were waiting about on the threshold. Sylvia pressed the bell. "Good afternoon. Good afternoon."

"And never *even* offered us a cup of tea," came in Mrs. Pelt's stage-whisper as Woodhams ushered them to the vestibule.

Sylvia waited till the door had closed on them. Then—

"Woodhams, I want the car at once."

"Yes, madam."

CHAPTER XL

KATHERINE SCORES

THE same uncouth maid opened the door of the flat to Sylvia.

"Is Mrs. Brierly in?"

"Well, I dunno. It's Mrs. Corbeyne, isn't it?" The greedy eyes added: "And you gave me a pound last time you came, remember?"

Sylvia remembered. She produced another.

"My business is urgent—and private. Where——"

She was taken into the same little room. The very new leather chair was still there and the tantalus with the pillared front and the ash-trays. She looked at them with a sort of terror. That other time when she had seen them they had told her only that Katherine was ludicrously wrong in her judgments. Now there was the wonder whether she had not been justified. If a man surrendered himself to Ealing, wouldn't he endure a room like this also? Wouldn't he accept it dully as the inevitable penalty? If he had drugged his critical defences and banished memory and gone down with shut eyes and sneering lips, would he have a right to rebel now?

The room had been furnished for him. Didn't that mean that his ultimate residence in the flat was, in common decency, to be taken for granted?

Sylvia's upper lip trembled so violently that she raised her hand to hide it; she was still hiding it when

Katherine came in. She was in a dark silk dress with touches of white and she wore it defiantly. This time she omitted her stage-tricks.

"What d'you want?" she asked, as bluntly as Sylvia herself would have asked it.

Sylvia, uninvited, sat down in the new leather chair. The terror was growing round her and in her.

"I have had a visit from some friends of yours, Mrs. Pelt and Mrs. Tuckey. I gather you have been telling them your version of the facts, and they are very sorry for you."

"Anyone would be," put in Katherine promptly, "if they knew what I'm going through now with not a soul coming near me all day and having to fight for what is justly due to me, though I must say I think it's you they'll be more sorry for when it's all over and I've been righted."

"Can you tell the truth?" asked Sylvia.

Katherine looked infinitely affronted.

"I ask you because you have lied to us so persistently and in a way so cleverly, that it is probably foolish to accept your word in anything."

"Well, *reely!*" gasped Katherine. "What good d'you think it will do you saying that kind of thing? Lying—me? You dare to speak to me like that in my own home!"

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders. With a word she could silence the fool, but the moment was not now. She must let her think the cards were all hers so that there would be, from her point of view, no need to cheat.

"There is something I want you to tell me *truthfully*. I told you that your friends are sorry for you, but it's not only what we will call your peculiar legal position which moves them. They——"

Her voice failed for some seconds. Katherine had paled a little, as though she recoiled from something.

Yet her eyes, like her servant's, were alive with greed.

"After John divorced you," Sylvia began again, "he lost all trace of feeling for you, except a vague pity. He has no trace of feeling for you now; nothing you can say will make me believe otherwise. I doubt whether he has even retained the pity. . . . No, listen, please. What you are going to tell me is whether—how things stood between you during the time you were together at Ealing."

Katherine's pallor grew. She laughed a tittering laugh that made Sylvia want to strangle her. Her tongue-tied embarrassment was so utterly unusual that it was in itself ominous.

"If you believe that you will get John back in the eyes of the world you can afford to be honest," Sylvia pointed out steadily. "You can afford to admit that he has not made love to you. Because if you think you are to be his legal wife again, you will have attained your wish and it will not matter to you whether he ever comes to care for you again."

"What's Mrs. Pelt been saying?"

"She said that to all appearances he was—devoted to you in Ealing. That in itself doesn't concern me, because no doubt you stipulated that he should act the part. I want to know whether the pretence ever became reality—even for an hour."

The greed sparkled in Katherine's eyes. To many women it would have betrayed the dishonesty behind it; but Sylvia was of a calibre that could not snatch and steal save consciously and with malice aforethought. The blind and blundering selfishness that grasps at anything for mere possession's sake was outside her understanding. She argued from an analysis of her own motives and, making careful allowances for all Katherine's possible standpoints, was flung out of her reckoning through the fact that Katherine had no abiding outlook, no fixed desire.

Katherine wanted John Corbeyne to care for her, but she would have sacrificed his love for an untarnished reputation, and she would have sacrificed the reputation next day for the pleasure of telling her neighbours that her husband was a callous brute who had often struck her and was now appealing to the law to be rid of her.

"I think there are things you would not lie to me about," said Sylvia, appealing brokenly to a sanity that was not there. "Mrs. Pelt hinted that you had a claim on John Corbeyne that a man of his type could not possibly ignore. That you would have—soon—a double claim on him—as I have."

"And if I had? What——"

"No. Don't dodge like that. Answer me. *Answer me.*"

Katherine was now extraordinarily pale. She drooped back against the door.

"Oh, don't bully me! Don't—don't frighten me so! My heart isn't as strong as it might be and what with one thing and another——" She put her hands up to her face and her shoulders heaved.

To Sylvia that old, old pose was new. She read into it, as she was meant to do, the answer she demanded. No woman, she would have reasoned had she been able to reason at all just then, would behave on purpose like an early-Victorian consumptive. The sudden nervous collapse, the hidden face, the shrinking as though from physical force—these Sylvia accepted as symptoms of a sensitive admission.

Sylvia found that she was saying, in a quite colourless voice—

"I see. I see. Thank you." She stopped, because that was all she had been able to say to Mrs. Pelt and Mrs. Tuckey, and it was really not worth repeating. Of course she saw. And why "thank you"? Wasn't it rather stagey to thank the lightning that struck the life out of you and left you—burnt out?

"Don't cry," she added to Katherine's half-turned back. "I will arrange to divorce John and he can marry you again——"

Katherine's protest was voluble and vigorous for one who was reduced to such an uncontrolled display of emotion. But Sylvia did not notice.

"Oh, yes, I know you think that," she said wearily. "I know you think your story will win your action for you. But you haven't heard yet—my solicitor hasn't yet told you—that we have filled in the gaps in your statements."

Katherine's hands had dropped from her face. She retreated backwards into the tiny room and the warring emotions had made her face old.

"We have found Mr. Brierly—the real Mr. Brierly," went on Sylvia with an indifferent gentleness that she did not recognise in herself. "He has signed a confession that he was with you at the cottage; that he was impersonating Lord Henry Graunham."

"It's a lie—it's a put-up story—it's—I'll——"

"Oh, hush! It's absolutely useless to deny it. And why fight, underhandedly, for John when I have said that I will give him his freedom to—pay his debt to you?"

"You mean, you'll divorce him because of what Mrs. Pelt said about him and me at Ealing and——"

Sylvia, unversed in greed, could not read the light in the dark eyes. She was puzzled only that the tears had gone so soon.

"No; because you have given me to understand that she was right in supposing you and he were lovers there. Whatever he feels towards you now, you may be sure he remembers and will take care of you."

Sylvia opened the door. Katherine was still staring, still pale. Her lips moved and uttered little rushes of words that meant nothing, led nowhere, neither affirmed nor denied.

"Good-bye," said Sylvia.

She went stiffly out of the flat, and down to the car. Bissett had to help her in.

"Are you ill, madam?" She looked at him vacantly. "Have you had a fall?"

"No. Yes. A fall. I fell down. Home, Bissett. No, go to Mr. Bayliss. He'll have to pretend that he did it all alone. He'd better meet him at Folkestone——"

Bissett was looking alarmed.

"Oh, be *quick*!" cried Sylvia in agony. "Take me away from this horrible Square!"

CHAPTER XLI

ON THE BOAT-TRAIN

A LETTER from Katherine, forwarded from his rooms, reached Corbeyne on his third day in Paris. It was a voluminous repetition of her offer to begin again and start afresh. She was very fond of that phrase, he remembered. Katherine, he supposed, conceived of life as teeming with possibilities of beginning again, and starting afresh, unhampered, presumably, by the moral debts incurred in the last particular failure. He cabled:

"Absolutely no use. Must decline to discuss matter further—Corbeyne."

He did not think of her again until the morning of his departure, when he received a cable from Bayliss, his solicitor. It was an excited cable, and proclaimed with much verbiage that Bayliss would meet him on the dockside and travel up to Town with him in order to discuss a matter of the utmost urgency. Vaguely the cable reminded him of Katherine.

Corbeyne spent no time in wondering why Bayliss was in such a deuce of a hurry to see him. In those crowded days in Paris he had put London and all that it held for him from his mind. There were a score of good reasons why Bayliss should want to see him in a deuce of a hurry.

When they met on the dockside, Corbeyne greeted him with a semblance of the old cheerfulness, and then

noticed with faint surprise that Bayliss, usually so pleasantly casual, was nervous. Bayliss talked weather to Miss Fellowes, and then led the way to the train. Corbeyne dropped a little behind him.

"I'm afraid my solicitor has something on his conscience," said Corbeyne quizzically to Miss Fellowes. "If you don't mind leaving us alone—he's a well-meaning chap, a splendid fellow, but he always talks drawing-roomese when a woman's about."

Vera Fellowes frowned. She saw that he had noticed the frown, so she had to add:

"It's a little humiliating that you should think I had to be told." She disappeared.

Corbeyne strode after Bayliss. "The girl is getting sensitive," ran his thoughts. "Nerves, I suppose. I expect I've been sweating her. I'll give her six months' holiday rather sooner than she expects—unless she's already spotted the game." Bayliss was babbling.

". . . so I made free use of your name, implied that it was a matter of State, and the station-master guaranteed that no one should enter our compartment. This is it."

Bayliss entered the compartment behind Corbeyne, and slammed the door. An official popped up from somewhere and locked it. Bayliss was fussing with his hat and umbrella.

"Had a good crossing?" he asked.

"Eh? Good crossing? Yes—oh yes. Very good," said Corbeyne.

Bayliss became informative about the probable behaviour of the train. He stated accurately the number of minutes before it would start, opined that it would arrive on the stroke, as he knew for a fact that one of the directors. . . .

Corbeyne pulled out a pipe and filled it.

"We're off! Bang on the minute!" exploded Bayliss.

"You've told me in considerable detail how you reserved this carriage, old man," said Corbeyne. "Now, tell me why you did it."

"During your absence in Paris," began Bayliss, as though he had rehearsed the opening, if nothing else, "a great many things have happened—a great many. You will find things changed—ah—very considerably. Things——"

"Come on, Bayliss," urged Corbeyne, with a touch of impatience. "Begin at the end, man. We'll come back to the trimmings, if necessary."

Bayliss flung out his hand.

"I simply can't begin at the end. I must work up to it. I know you hate that sort of thing, but there's no help for it," he said plaintively.

Corbeyne put his feet on the cushions and waited.

Bayliss became suddenly calm and pleasant.

"You will remember putting up to me that hypothetical case about Mrs. Smith and Mr. Jones, and my taking counsel's opinion on it?" he demanded.

"Yes. What about it?"

"To begin with—it wasn't hypothetical."

Corbeyne nodded slowly three times. There was a curious look in his eyes as he asked:

"How did you spot it?"

"Well—that deed of gift—and your disappearance—the Ealing affair, and one thing and another," said Bayliss unblushingly. "One couldn't help spotting it. Anyhow that doesn't matter. The point that does matter is that it's all settled. A thing of the past. You can forget it."

Corbeyne swung his feet back to the floor.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he asked dispassionately.

"Lord Henry Graunham wasn't with her. But another man was. We can prove it. I've got the man. His name happens to be Brierly. He——"

Bayliss faded out of Corbeyne's consciousness. He

perceived it and kept silence. Corbeyne was lounging back on the cushions, smoking. Minutes passed.

"There was another man with her. We can prove it. His name was Brierly." What on earth did it matter what his name was! There was another man with her.

He must just get hold of that before they went any further. There was another man. Then, of course, it was all right. He could forget it—it was a thing of the past. And he and Sylvia had lost something under three months. What an ass Bayliss was! He could have cabled it instead of talking about trains. No, there was a confusion somewhere. By the time he had been talking about trains it was too late to cable.

He got up and opened the opposite window.

"This heating apparatus is pretty powerful!" he said.

Bayliss stared at a coloured photograph of a cathedral which adorned a panel under the hat-rack. There was a long pause. He had time to wonder why a coloured cathedral could be expected to attract the average tourist.

"It's getting a bit chilly," said Corbeyne, and pulled up the window, and then: "My dear fellow, why not get on with it at once?"

Bayliss had seen a man do that sort of thing before—a man who was being told of an unexpected legacy of a large amount. His mind slipped back to the wonder why Mrs. Corbeyne had insisted that he should break the news, taking all the credit, keeping her entirely outside it all. She had been most emphatic about it. Her voice had sounded odd. . . . Corbeyne was fidgeting.

"If you feel sure you're ready to follow me," said Bayliss—"there's plenty of time, you know—she's not due until——" As Corbeyne scowled he hurried on—"the position is simply this. I think my analysis of the matter will be found correct when I say that Deagle——"

"Oh yes, Deagle!" exclaimed Corbeyne. "Why on earth didn't you mention Deagle before?"

"That's all right, old man. We're coming to that. Of course, you gave me a pretty broad hint a month ago as to what Deagle was up to. But you didn't tell me he'd got hold of this divorce tangle. Well, it isn't a tangle any longer. And Master Deagle has got hold of nothing—in fact, we've got hold of Master Deagle. You can take it from me that *The Plain Man* is finished as far as you are concerned. There will be an unconditional apology next week, or I'm a Dutchman."

Corbeyne relit his pipe. He must pull himself together, he decided, grasp the facts and fit them into shape. They *were* facts—Bayliss would not pull his leg. After all, this sort of thing often happened. A man thought he was in the last ditch, wrote his epitaph to slow music, then was hauled out of it by blind chance or by some pleasant, energetic idiot like Bayliss. The facts were there, but the perspective was missing. He had been overworking, and his power of attention was faltering. He must pull himself together.

"Let's tackle one thing at a time," said Corbeyne, with sudden briskness. "When my first wife approached me on the day of the announcement of Lord Henry Graunham's death, I, of course, immediately thought that if Graunham was not there another man must have been. I put it to her. She denied it. I thought it about equally probable that she was lying or telling the truth. It didn't seem to me to matter very much. If she was lying, I reasoned, she would obviously have taken good care to cover her tracks. To attempt a search for a man unknown alleged to be the lover of an obscure woman eleven years ago—I should simply have made a fool of myself. She threatened exposure on the lines I explained to you—and there seemed nothing for it but to accept her terms."

"Did you try bluffing her?" put in Bayliss.

"I was no more in a position to bluff her than I was in a position to fight her," said Corbeyne. "My hands were entirely tied by the existence of my wife and child. Left to myself, of course, I would have fought. But there's no kind of justification for fighting, when you know that if you lose the fight the victim will be a woman and her child. Any moral imbecile can do the strong, silent man act when someone else is going to pay for it. I conceived it the less dishonourable to accept a humiliating surrender. I will freely admit that I led my wife to suppose that I had become infatuated with another woman. And now this news of yours turns the whole thing inside out. I am ready for the details."

Bayliss gave them. In loyal obedience to his instructions, he pre-dated his activities by some couple of months. He paid a warm tribute to Rason the detective. "Of course, I would have been as helpless without him as he would have been without us."

"Between us we nailed down this fellow Brierly, we have his deposition to the effect that he was with the lady at that cottage—together with a circumstantial confession of his having impersonated Lord Henry Graunham. The lady was unaware of the impersonation until he revealed it to her, which was not until *after* the papers had been served. He advised her to fight the case, promising to marry her if she lost it. He—er—didn't redeem his promise."

Bayliss opened his attaché case.

"Here's a copy of his deposition," he said, "and when you've read that I'll show you another."

"Let's see the other one first," said Corbeyne.

Bayliss handed him the sworn statement of Shrager.

Corbeyne glanced through it rapidly, and then, with a muttered exclamation, turned to Bayliss.

"Very neat piece of work, that, Bayliss! Any grand jury would find a true bill for conspiracy on that, I imagine. H'm! That will enable us to get rid of a

particularly pernicious individual. You said something about *The Plain Man*?"

"That is *The Plain Man*," said Bayliss."

For a moment Corbeyne looked puzzled. Bayliss was smiling, as if to imply that his client was not quite himself yet, but would be all right in a minute, and would see the light.

"They will prove that I was at Ealing with the lady in question," said Corbeyne. "Nothing here disproves it."

"Ah! Running through Maidstone! Must be doing well over sixty miles an hour, I should say! . . . Don't you see, Deagle owns a controlling interest in *The Plain Man*. Deagle is indicted for conspiracy—if we care to present this."

"I see," said Corbeyne. "A sort of counter-black-mail, as it were. He started the game, and we've beaten him at it, eh?"

"Poetic justice!" suggested Bayliss.

"I'm not exactly squeamish," said Corbeyne. "But you see it's confusing the two things—the Ministry and my private life. I know what you will say—'Come over here where the Minister of Credit can't hear us'. . . . Every man who holds public office has the chance to play Poo-bah if he cares to take it. I'm not sure that I do."

"I'll have to think it over," continued Corbeyne. "My wife knows nothing of all this divorce complication——"

Bayliss swallowed.

"—I'll have to explain the whole thing to her and take her advice in the matter as she, after all, is very deeply concerned."

"Yes," said Bayliss. "That would be a very sound thing, if I may say so. I've contrived to let Mrs.—er—Brierly and Deagle know what is in the wind, so no active step will be taken by anyone just yet. One really has only to sit on the fence and let the whole

thing simmer down. Well, to get back to the details; you'll like a fuller explanation of Brierly."

"Yes. Who was he to start with?"

"A bit difficult to answer in one breath!" said Bayliss. "If you mean what is he now—he's a house agent in a decent way of business, I should say. Before that he was a traveller—in silk, I believe—in New Zealand."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Corbeyne. He was thinking of that evening in Ealing when he had had to back up Katherine's lies about himself and his past. He remembered that she had made him a traveller in silk—in New Zealand.

"What's up?" asked Bayliss.

"Nothing," said Corbeyne. "Please go on. What was he doing at the time, and how did he come to impersonate Graunham? I suppose," he added uneasily, "there's no possibility of the whole thing being a frost?"

"None whatever!" replied Bayliss soothingly. "He's quite a decent chap in his way. Reformed rake, don't you know, determined to let his own bygones be bygones and not reproach himself. I gather that he had some sort of personal job with Lord Henry Graunham. He was probably a valet—confidential valet—looked after him when he was drunk and that sort of thing.

"Well, the notoriety which the master enjoyed seems to have excited the valet's envy. Brierly passed himself off one evening as Lord Henry Graunham, and apparently the thing was a success. Then he began to do it systematically. I don't think he ever committed any crime—and it's not our affair if he did. He has told me, and I believe him, that it was just youthful vanity. He fancied himself as a dissolute young peer of the realm, don't you know. I gleaned the impression that it assisted his adventures with the opposite sex. As he was at least no more of an outsider than

Graunham himself, no one suspected him in the limited circle in which his impersonation was sustained. The thing ran on of its own impetus. If you had seen him the other day—if you hadn't known the real one was dead—you would probably have identified him as Lord Henry Graunham."

"No. I never saw either of them—the real or the imitation. My wife—as she was then—had her own circle of friends—I was very glad to keep out. . . . So, apparently, Shrager really believed—Brierly—to be Graunham!"

"Yes. There is certainly no doubt on that point. He only got suspicions during the last month or so—and Deagle made it worth his while not to pursue them. Well after he had cleared out, Brierly ran straight and led a blameless life—except in the matter of his broken promise to the lady."

Corbeyne was deep in thought.

"Those are the main facts," finished Bayliss. "We'll leave it at that."

"We won't leave it without my thanking you for what you've done," said Corbeyne. "Personally, I'm more obliged to you than you can guess. Professionally, I'm not in the least surprised that you've cracked a pretty hard nut."

"Not at all, old man, thanks very much—er—Hullo, she's slowing—we can't be running in yet—it's not a quarter to——"

Corbeyne did not hear him.

He would tell Sylvia all he had meant to tell her, but now as a horror past and done with. In a few hours now he would be telling her. It would be infinitely restful and comforting. He and she would laugh at the Tuckeys and the Pelts and the silver boxes and the whisky and the miles and miles of asphalt. He would tell her too about herself and the Jobber.

CHAPTER XLII

A ROMANTIC SCOUNDREL

ON arrival in London Corbeyne was compelled to go at once to the Ministry, where urgent work detained him until ten o'clock. It was then too late to think of seeing Sylvia, so he returned to his chambers.

As he inserted his latchkey the door was opened by Garfield.

"Ah, Garfield! Everything all right, I hope?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Deagle is in the study, sir. He has been here since nine o'clock."

Corbeyne's face showed a startled displeasure.

"He said he didn't mind waiting, sir, and that the matter was most urgent," supplemented Garfield. "I—I didn't see my way clear to giving a definite refusal, sir."

"All right, Garfield. Just take my coat, will you?"

Corbeyne strode into the study. Deagle rose as he entered. He had taken off the light overcoat that covered his evening dress.

"Good evening, Mr. Deagle. I really cannot imagine why you have called."

"Am I at liberty to remain and say what I have to say?" asked Deagle. His smile was unutterably benignant, but his eyes were veiled.

"As you are here it would be as well," said Corbeyne coldly, "provided, of course, that you have not come to

offer me a bargain of any kind. That would be a mere waste of time."

"Precisely," said Deagle. "The basis of our bargain has been cut from under my feet by your very able assistants. That discloses an advantage that men like you have over men like me, Mr. Corbeyne. I pay for human service and am often cheated—as in this case. You have the gift of getting people to work for you out of sentiment. And the mass of mankind is a great deal more sentimental than greedy."

Corbeyne discovered a faint flicker of interest in the personality of the man. He would persist with his flowery platitudes in the teeth of a ludicrous and humiliating exposure. Also, one had to admit that Deagle looked neither ludicrous nor humiliated.

"I never suspect my opponents of personal malice, however hardly I may have hit them," continued Deagle generously. "I feel no compunction, therefore, in coming here to ask whether you intend to prosecute me."

"I have not yet decided," answered Corbeyne.

"Then it is possible that I may aid you in forming a decision," said Deagle. "Certain developments in my industry during the last seven days have made it appear to us that a Protective Bill would not be of so great an advantage as we had believed."

Corbeyne laughed. He was amused at what he regarded as the feebleness of the attempt to placate him.

"That does not touch the issue at any point," he said. "I am not concerned with your propaganda so long as it is constitutional. I am concerned in this matter solely with your criminal methods of attempting to obtain what you desire."

"True! True, Mr. Corbeyne. My remark was a mere preface to the statement that if I am left undisturbed I shall be in a position to persuade my federation to collaborate loyally with the Ministry in the operation

of your Act. It will make a great deal of difference to you if you can be sure not merely of the political but also of the economic support of our industry."

"I admit it," said Corbeyne. "It is a factor in the case, though a small one. If the federation are willing to follow your lead it is conceivable that they might follow mine. Have you anything else to aid me in forming a decision, Mr. Deagle?"

"I have the further fact that I have ordered an unconditional withdrawal and apology to be published in the next issue of *The Plain Man*."

"And you mean that you can still revoke the order?" suggested Corbeyne. "That is a purely personal factor which I shall not allow to weigh with me."

"Pardon me!" cut in Deagle. "Not a *purely* personal matter. A personal matter, perhaps, but a public matter most certainly. Your Bill is already virtually an Act. Acts have become dead letters almost as soon as they have been inscribed upon the statute book. There are a hundred possible hitches in the practical workings of that Act, and you know it. You know, too, that you are one of the few men who could hope to make a success of it. Permit me to repeat—a public matter."

"You are very complimentary, Mr. Deagle," said Corbeyne with a grimace. "But I would suggest that you have not quite adjusted your mentality to the facts. After the testimony signed by the man you employed as chauffeur—after the exposure of that ill-fated woman who was my first wife—your egregious paper ceases to be a menace to me. I shall not accept *The Plain Man's* apology. I shall press for exemplary damages. You will prove without difficulty that I stayed in that maisonnette with Mrs. Brierly. I shall relate the precise circumstances in which I was coerced into doing so. If you imagine that the scandal will now so reflect upon me that I shall have to resign my

portfolio, I think you grossly underestimate the intelligence of the British public.

"It was one thing when you and your accomplice could bring upon me first the suspicion of having faked my divorce—when you could have told the more ignorant section of the electorate that the woman I proclaimed to be my second wife was legally my mistress—then I admit you would have created enough din to drive me out of public life. But now you can only prove that I went to that maisonnette under coercion. Your moment has passed. You haven't a weapon against me."

There was a silence. Then:

"I have not denied it," said Deagle, and at last he spoke quite naturally, in the voice of an elderly man who is grievously disappointed. "I have come here to admit defeat. I am offering you a surrender, the conditions of which will be dictated by your chivalry."

"Chivalry!" echoed Corbeyne scornfully. "You talk about this blackguardly intrigue as if it were a fencing match and I had disarmed you. You're waiting for me to hand you back your rapier with a bow, or some such precious nonsense. If you can only think in archaic metaphors—your rapier is an assassin's dagger, my friend. You tried to stab me in the back and to a degree you succeeded, and now a policeman has stepped in and grabbed you. We're getting pretty literal now, Mr. Deagle."

Deagle was in control of himself again.

"I perceive we shall never reach agreement," he purred, helping himself into his overcoat, "because, like Carlyle's charwomen, we are arguing from different premises. You refuse to accept my conception of the struggle for existence. I find myself equally unable to grasp yours."

Deagle made towards the door, then checked himself.

"In all probability this will be our last meeting, Mr. Corbeyne."

Corbeyne sighed with a deliberate weariness.

"I expect so, Mr. Deagle."

Deagle took a sealed envelope from his breast pocket.

"This," he said with a flourish, "*this*—will at least serve the purpose of convincing you that my principles are not humbug. You have refused to give me any assurance that you do not intend to prosecute. The fight is over and I have lost. In the bitterness of defeat I pause and—pay you a tribute of chivalry."

He laid the sealed envelope on the table and left the room.

"Stage villain!" said Corbeyne as the door closed.

Odd how men and women would model themselves upon their own shadows! Carfax, for instance—all that noisy bustle. He had conned it all up from interviews with himself in business magazines. Katherine spent her life in imitating Sarah Bernhardt in *La Dame aux Tenebres*. Deagle had been bitten by the romantic brigand, rhapsodised about the law of the wild, and at the conclusion of every intrigue wanted to hand back the purse to the widow or salute his "foeman."

Corbeyne glanced at the sealed envelope and stayed himself in a gesture of contempt.

"And I am playing the incorruptible statesman who will not deign to—to do whatever the high-falutin' term is for opening that package. Better nip it in the bud and start deigning right away."

He tore the envelope. Inside was a letter from Katherine.

"Mr. Deagle," it began. "You may think you have treated me fairly, so I'm just going to tell you what I think." Corbeyne turned a page, and another, and another, skipping the details of what Katherine thought. As he turned the fourth page there was a passage marked in blue pencil. Deagle's blue pencil presumably!

"I know what you'll say about him and me and you're wrong, you'll say we quarrelled in the ordinary

way and that's what spoilt it, but we didn't. He was nothing but *cruel* to me from the moment he first came to me. Not so much as a kind word did I get from him, except what he might have said to an ordinary stranger if he hadn't been too polite to everyone but me to show that he was bored stiff. If he'd been different I wouldn't have minded about you not keeping your promise because I could have had at least something to look back upon, so you see you're quite wrong in thinking he got tired of me, as if we——"

The sentence ran on interminably, but the blue pencil had stopped.

Corbeyne laid the letter down. Why had Deagle given it to him with all that patter about chivalry? Where did the chivalry come in?

Was it to assist him in his action against *The Plain Man*? Hardly! Deagle would be clear-headed enough to recognise that the paper's plea of justification would be confined to the fact that he himself had lived in the maisonnette in Ealing. This letter would not affect that particular issue.

He paced the room, then paused in his stride.

"Oh-h-h! He's helping me to put things right with my wife by enabling me to produce proof that——"

Corbeyne laughed, but the laugh was not properly finished.

He wheeled round and thrust the letter into his pocket.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE DAMP SQUIB

LORD CARFAX, like many another successful man, was possessed of a very considerable brain and a very inconsiderable mind. At any given task requiring cleverness, application and a degree of courage, he was well worth his peerage. His brain was a delicate instrument that did things for him, and then left it to his emotions and instincts to find out why the things had been done. He was, therefore, without anything approaching co-ordination. He could never link up anything that ought to be linked up and, conversely, linked a great many things that had no connection with each other.

The part of his emotional being which he called his knowledge of the world, was genuinely distressed for the welfare of Sylvia Corbeyne. Now that his work for the Ministry of Credit was practically at an end, and nothing else required boosting at the moment, his chief pre-occupation was with Sylvia. She was uppermost in his thoughts when on the day following Corbeyne's return from Paris Miss Fellowes called.

Carfax had an extremely high opinion of Miss Fellowes. He greeted her warmly and invited her to tell him all her troubles.

"How did you guess that I had any troubles, Lord Carfax?"

Carfax had guessed nothing of the kind. His clichés were always getting him into trouble of that

kind. He grinned vacuously, hoping she would talk about Paris. He wondered, *en passant*, whether she had bought that smart dark thing in Paris that she was wearing. She really looked awfully smart and competent and complete. A nice girl. Then, as she lifted her eyes to his, he received an impression of—of— He couldn't put a name to it, but knew it was disturbing.

"I'm in trouble with my job," said Miss Fellowes before he could ask anything. "Can you take me back?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Carfax and promptly thought of Sylvia. "Has Corbeyne been sweating you?"

"Never as much as you did, Lord Carfax. And yet I want to come back to you." Her lips smiled, but her beautiful eyes went on disturbing him.

"This is serious," said Carfax reprovingly. "I'm awfully sorry you don't hit it off with him."

"I do hit it off with him," said Miss Fellowes, and looked sharply away. So sharply that of any other woman Carfax would have suspected tears.

Carfax stroked the back of his head. "Worst of these clever women!" he was saying to himself "Always ready to admit everything and never let you make excuses for them." He continued the stroking process.

"I can see as far through a brick wall as most," he jerked out. "*The Plain Man* isn't any use to you, eh?"

Miss Fellowes' glance flashed back at him.

"In other words, rats leave a sinking ship," she said. "Thanks. That's a pretty deadly insult to me, Lord Carfax."

"My dear girl, I beg your pardon!"

"Look a little further through the brick wall," suggested Miss Fellowes, her anger evaporating.

Lord Carfax thought again of Sylvia. Then he thought of his father who had told him that women

were a mistake in business. Back again to Sylvia and the suspicion that Miss Fellowes had spotted something!

"It isn't work or pay. It isn't the difficulties he's got into. And you get on well with him. Yet you're going to leave him. Hang the brick wall! Are you going to tell me why?"

"Yes," said Miss Fellowes. "But when I've told you, you'll say I haven't told you, that I'm keeping something back."

"I expect you'll do that in any case," said Carfax. "Let's hear as much as you care to say."

"I am going to leave him because I can't work comfortably for a man who is so very happily married."

There was a pause. Carfax filled it by glaring at her. But he could not glare the trouble out of her eyes, or the gallant little smile from her lips.

"The things you respectable girls say—they're a hundred times worse than the things the other sort say! What the dickens do you think a sane man is going to read into a speech like that? Why I—I've a jolly good mind to tell you."

"They aren't really such dreadful things because we're always so careful of the men to whom we say them," murmured Miss Fellowes. "Some men of course would immediately take that to mean that I wanted a boss I could flirt with."

Lord Carfax gulped. There was another pause. Then:

"Can I come back to you, Lord Carfax, or are you full up?"

It was not a warm day, but Lord Carfax produced his handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"Yes!" he gasped. "That is, no. What I'm trying to say is that I am not full up and shall be glad to have you back; but you must make it clear to Corbeyne that I didn't invite you to do so."

"Thank you," said Miss Fellowes and rose. "I'd like to take a bit of a holiday first. Shall we say in a month from now?"

"Yes, yes," said Carfax. "I say, don't go."

Miss Fellowes waited.

"My father said women were a mistake in business, and he was right," said Lord Carfax. "He meant typists. We've got used to them. And now your sort has bobbed up. Enough to make the poor old boy turn in his grave. . . . Look here, there's one advantage he never thought of. We can talk to you as if you were men. Can't we?"

"You're a little bit diffident about doing so, but please go ahead and I'll do my best to respond."

"Pah! Look here, I'm worried about your leaving Corbeyne. Especially for the reason you gave which I don't pretend to understand." Miss Fellowes looked steadily at him. "Well, I may understand a bit of it—the bit that concerns yourself, y'know—but I—I never could get that epigram stuff. You say he's too wrapped up in his wife. That's ironic, isn't it? You know what I mean by ironic. Upside down. Got to twist it round before you get it."

"No," said Miss Fellowes slowly. "It was literal. I mean just what I said. He is just that—wrapped up in her."

"H'm! D'you know Mrs. Corbeyne was once my ward? I know her pretty well. Now I was under the impression that—er—well, she and her husband didn't hit it off at all. . . . His living in those chambers!"

"There's nothing in that," said Miss Fellowes. "I thought there was once. But I found there wasn't. I've seen him look at her. . . . I do hate talking like a man."

Lord Carfax drummed with a ruler.

"D'you know anything about his—the—the Ealing lady?"

"Good-bye, Lord Carfax."

"Look here, Miss Fellowes——"

"Good-bye, Lord Carfax."

"Cut it out!" commanded Lord Carfax. "You've paid me the compliment of wanting to come back and work with me. Well, you wouldn't do that if you thought I was the kind of outsider who would ask a question like that if he were not driven by pretty strong moral considerations?"

"Are you driven by considerations of friendship for Mr. Corbeyne?"

"No. I'm driven by my feeling for my ward."

Miss Fellowes thought for a moment.

"I believe that," she said. "And I'll tell you all I know. It's this; he is too big to hate—but if he could hate he would hate the Ealing lady. Good-bye."

Lord Carfax was alone. He nodded to himself in the diminutive office mirror. "He hates the lady at Ealing. That's a pretty damning bit of evidence. He hates his wife—because he loves Sylvia. My fault, too! Sylvia! Poor little Sylvia! The best of women have to be saved in spite of themselves. Damn the Ministry of Credit! I'll expose Brierly right away. Here and now."

He picked up the receiver of the telephone. His brain was hard at work, driving him into headlong action.

"*Daily Post*," he rapped out at the girl on the extension. "I want to speak to Sir Marco himself."

While he was waiting for the connection his fingers picked up a pencil and began to scrawl on the blotting paper.

"*Astounding revel——*"

"Sir Marco? Carfax speaking. I say, old man, I've got a big thing for you. Regular whopper! Can you send a star man round to me right away? Thanks. I'll make it an exclusive, yes. That ought to square us up for that little leg-up you gave us over Education."

For the next ten minutes Lord Carfax's emotions and instincts were busy overhauling his brain. Sylvia would not like being saved; might even take counter-measures. It was perilously near disloyalty to betray the conspiracy without the knowledge of the other two conspirators. Brierly was a dangerous factor. He'd changed so of late, grown so extraordinarily part-perfect. Supposing he put up a bluff and Sylvia helped him hold to it?

By the time the *Daily Post* reporter arrived, Lord Carfax was feeling as chilly as the day itself. As a result he thrust out his jaw and plunged straight into the line of fire.

"Seen that stuff in *The Plain Man* about John Corbeyne?" began Carfax. "Remember the lady at Ealing?"

The reporter nodded. He had made a big reputation as a war correspondent and was used to handling big things.

"The lady at Ealing is Mrs. Brierly. She was his wife—she is his wife, I should say. The Minister of Credit's name is not John Corbeyne. It's J. W. Brierly. Three months ago Corbeyne disappeared with a woman—left his wife. This chap is the living image of Corbeyne and he's been impersonating him. There's your story. What about it?"

Lord Carfax was leaning back in his chair with the frightened pride of a man who has smashed his idol.

"What about it?" repeated Lord Carfax.

"It's very, very strong stuff, Lord Carfax," said the reporter doubtfully. "I'll have to see the Chief before I do anything. I can just stop him going out to lunch. May I use your 'phone?"

"Fire away," said Lord Carfax, and waited. The reporter took up the 'phone and put it down again.

"You can give me proofs, of course?"

"Dammit, it's a bit thick if I'm to be asked for proofs of a story!" said Lord Carfax indignantly.

"Best proof you can have is to see Brierly himself. I advise you to get around to the Ministry and put it to him straight. If he cavils at it you can come back here and I'll give you a few facts. While you're away I'll dictate the details if you like."

"Well—just hold on till I've seen the Chief, will you?" asked the reporter. "Er—if you don't mind."

He was a star reporter—no doubt about that; yet he was behaving like a provincial beginner, thought Carfax irritably. He was intensely irritated. To be acting at the dictates of his brain against every instinct and emotion, and then to be doubted!

"Oh, right ho!" he said. "You fellows take things a bit coolly, I must say. I'll be back here at two-thirty. You can ring me up then."

Almost as soon as Lord Carfax had returned from lunch—a miserable and solitary lunch—he received a telephone call. But it was not from the *Daily Post*. It was from Bayliss, Corbeyne's solicitor.

"I've just had a man from the *Daily Post* here, Lord Carfax," said Bayliss. "I don't care to speak about the matter over the 'phone. If I come round to your place at once, can you see me? It's of the utmost urgency, as you will, of course, know."

"Come along by all means," said Lord Carfax.

Lord Carfax felt not a little insulted that the *Daily Post* had applied to Corbeyne's solicitor. Moreover it was beginning to dawn upon him that, quite apart from the ceaseless conflict in his own mind, the whole exposure was going to be difficult. He had anticipated trouble with Brierly and possibly Sylvia; but apparently the very opening was bristling with the hostility of those who should be merely the instruments of his will.

"Well, Bayliss, I don't know why the *Daily Post* have dragged you into it in the first instance," he began as soon as the solicitor was announced. "I suppose you want to go into it with me."

"It's a jolly good thing for you, Lord Carfax, they did drag me in. You've struck a mare's nest. I don't know how you tumbled on this wonderful idea, but it's dead wrong."

Lord Carfax had had dealings with Bayliss on Corbeyne's recommendation and shared the latter's belief in his professional ability. For this reason he snatched at his temper and held it.

"I'll start off by telling you, Mr. Bayliss, that *I* engineered the whole thing from the beginning," he said. "It was a tom-fool thing to do, and I expect I'll be broken for doing it. But I wanted to save the nation. I——"

"Pardon me," cut in Bayliss. "You've had your leg pulled. There's no possibility of doubt in the matter."

"Listen, damn you!" exploded Lord Carfax. "Three months ago Corbeyne deserted his wife for another woman——"

"Led her to *believe* that he had deserted her. His first wife coerced him into doing it," corrected Bayliss. "There was a flaw in Corbeyne's first divorce—or he thought there was—and he'd never have known better if Mrs. Corbeyne hadn't put the whole thing right for him while he was in Paris."

All Carfax's intuitions and emotions and instincts and prejudices rose up and turned giddy somersaults inside his head and froze the words of mockery upon his lips.

"This is the thing in detail," said Bayliss.

The story came tumbling out.

CHAPTER XLIV

DUST OF DREAMS

THROUGHOUT the day that followed his return from Paris, John Corbeyne had been conscious of a subtle difference in the atmosphere at the Ministry. Bayliss, he was quite sure, had told nobody. *The Plain Man* could hardly be suspected of advertising its own collapse—nor could one suppose that, had it done so, the news would have penetrated to Whitehall.

Yet the Permanent Secretary had been as nearly obsequious as a Permanent Secretary can ever be. A note from the Prime Minister, flatteringly informal, asked him to lunch on the following day. The very policeman at the door seemed to salute him with a new zest.

It was some time before he realised that the change was in himself. It was as if he had been wearing a shade above his eyes and seen only that which had been pushed directly into his line of vision. Now the shade was gone; he could look round and up, unhampered.

The sense of fatigue had gone from him. The menace of the clock under which hitherto he had been working had now been removed. For the first time since he had become Minister he was able to lay plans on the assumption that he would be there to carry them out.

His soul shouted within him as he fell upon his work.

In a couple of hours he had set a dozen new balls rolling which were destined to make financial history.

The day tore past. . . .

"What's the time?" he asked Miss Fellowes. "Four o'clock? I can't see anyone else to-day." He took his hat. "I'm leaving now, Miss Fellowes, and shan't return to-day."

Miss Fellowes opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again.

"Good-bye," she said, much too softly for him to hear. She watched him swing from the room.

Corbeyne went to his chambers. Sylvia was not expecting him till half-past four. He wasted time for ten minutes on tasks of a trivial nature, and at twenty-five minutes past looked at himself in the mirror.

"Garfield!" he called. "This tie's a bit ragged."

"Yes, sir," said Garfield unquestioningly, and brought another. Corbeyne took his hat and went to the door. There a recollection came to him.

He hesitated, frowning. Then, half-reluctantly, he went back to his bedroom and took up the coat he had been wearing when Deagle called. Corbeyne fumbled in the pocket and found the letter Deagle had left with him.

He stood for a few seconds, weighing the package meditatively in his hand. Then he slipped it into his pocket.

As a result of his meditations he arrived at Corbeyne House two minutes late and unreasonably flustered thereby.

"Mrs. Corbeyne is in the study, sir."

Corbeyne made for the study. His nervousness rushed him into speech almost as he opened the door.

"I'm a bit behind-hand. Sorry! Left things until the last moment!"

Sylvia was sitting in the big chair by the hearth. A small wood fire was burning and its fragrance

strayed up and out into the room. It seemed to claim Sylvia's attention very deeply. She neither moved nor spoke.

Corbeyne, brought to a stammering halt, looked at her hungrily. Presently she would—she must—look up. A pulse hammered in his wrist. He would stride across to her, when her eyes met his, and pull her up out of that great dark chair and kiss her—kiss her—— Words could come afterwards. Let his kisses and hers banish the last shred of that grim pretence that need never have been. He would laugh, with her, to think that it need never have been. . . .

Sylvia looked up. Her eyes were quite expressionless. She smiled with her lips.

"Did you have a good crossing?" And then, as he was speechless—"Here's tea. On that low table, Woodhams, please."

Corbeyne saw a chair and sat down on it. Woodhams was arranging hot water and things. Sylvia had asked him if he had had a good crossing.

Corbeyne replied that he had. He added the information that the train had been on time. He talked about the train until Woodhams left the room.

Then he looked again at Sylvia. And, while he realised that there was still some chasm of doubt between her and him, he realised also that he need never again talk about boats or trains or the weather to anyone. He was a Minister of the Crown, a financier, and there were no dark secrets in his life and he need never make small-talk to anyone again as long as he lived.

Sylvia was pouring out the tea. Her silence gave Corbeyne time. After all, he had had no real reason to suppose that she had ever doubted his statement of having been "drawn from her side." He had drifted into the belief that she knew of his unwillingness to leave her; her acknowledged comradeship had seemed to imply it, and her relinquishing of the absurd "Mr.

Brierly" formula, and her hint that she was working on his behalf. But when all this was analysed, admitted Corbeyne, it only came to this: that she thought of him as physically infatuated with another woman even while everything else in him needed her still.

So that, of course, words must come first, before he could touch even her hands. Words. He felt them somehow as dull and lifeless things.

"Sylvia."

Sylvia had filled one cup. The amber stream she was directing into the other shook and splashed aside into the saucer.

"Well, John?"

"Ah!" ejaculated Corbeyne.

Again their eyes met. Her use of his name had started that pulse once more. His hands burnt and his throat was dry. He couldn't see her properly with the fire-light against her profile and the shadows of the chair.

"Will you take your tea?" said Sylvia.

Corbeyne took the tea, held it for a moment uncertainly, then put it on the floor, remembered that she had in the past objected to that practice and removed it to the table out of his reach. A sense of bafflement was rising in him. He knew it was unreasonable, since he had not yet even begun to explain, but——

He found himself launched.

"As it so happens, you were infinitely wise to postpone our discussion last week. We were—both on the very edge of destruction, then; now, everything's safe again. So safe that my explanation of everything that has happened—our own personal problem as well as such incidents as Deagle and *The Plain Man* will very probably sound tame and unconvincing."

"Oh, no," said Sylvia colourlessly. She stirred her tea.

Corbeyne, his bafflement growing, struggled on.

"Well. I propose first to place you in full possession of the facts of our position—as it was until yesterday. I must ask you to carry your mind back to the day when you read in the paper——"

"The announcement of Lord Henry Graunham's death," put in Sylvia. "I know all about that, John. There is no need to go over it. I talked it over with Mr. Bayliss."

There was a long silence. Corbeyne was rigidly contemplating a circle of facts. The explanation that should have astounded her, should have brought her out of the big chair into his arms, into his life, was actually unnecessary. That deadened tone of her voice suggested that it never had astounded her. Then why did she sit so stiffly in the big chair? The circle whirled, maddening him.

"You know all about it?" he muttered dazedly. "You know all about it. Then why——"

"I didn't know until quite recently," she explained. She was still stirring her tea. "And at the time when I found out, it would have been—unsuitable—to launch into a personal discussion. You were already strung up to breaking point over the Bill and so on, and I——"

Her voice failed her suddenly. At that, the first sign of her emotion, the thudding pulses in Corbeyne drove him out of his chair towards her.

"But before we go any further, I want you to know that I don't wish you to count me as an enemy," she said, and her tone brought him to a foolish standstill. "I am ready to discuss the main moves in the game with you—to take instructions from you to a point. I presume my action for divorce would terminate your career at the Ministry. Really, it all shakes down to one thing; how much longer you feel you ought to be at the Ministry for the sake of the country."

"You propose to bring an action for divorce?" he heard himself ask, standing there so foolishly before

her. "You know all that has happened and yet you—oh, but you can't know! You——" He heard her try to interrupt him, but he waved her aside. "You can't know that the woman at Ealing was my first wife." He was breathless with the urgency of it.

"Of course I know," she answered levelly. "How could I not know it? Her identity explains the danger of Deagle and *The Plain Man*—the whole situation."

He fell back a pace or two. He felt as though he were suspended in mid-air. Somewhere there must be firm ground; but he dangled, supremely helpless.

"But, Sylvia, if you know—— A woman who was Deagle's tool, as she was, and a clumsy fool into the bargain; a woman I'd freed myself from once——"

She made a gesture with her hand that waved aside discussion of the subject, but he ploughed on.

"You can't seriously believe I made love to her, Sylvia!"

Sylvia looked at the fire.

"Sylvia!"

She did not turn her head.

"You *do* believe it! Good Lord, how amazing!"

She locked her hands together suddenly.

"*That's* not amazing, that I should believe it," she exclaimed. "It's that *you*——"

He cut in determinedly, his brain clearing.

"Taking all the facts into consideration I see that it's a perfectly reasonable supposition," he said. "I admit I had ventured the hope that you would not be perfectly reasonable in this matter. But as you are—— will you allow me to explain my actions from the moment I walked out of the house some three months ago?"

"Right at the beginning, as soon as the announcement was printed, Mrs. Brierly sent for me. I was a bit worried about the thing and I went. She had her tale pat, coached, of course, as I found out afterwards, by Deagle."

"You saw her—in the first instance?"

"She produced the facts, with which you are apparently familiar, about Graunham being in prison at the time and threatened an immediate action to have the decree rescinded and our marriage—yours and mine—thereby invalidated. I could avert all this if I chose to come and live with her—that is, to stay under the same roof and pass myself off as her husband. I was amused at first. I offered her a mild bribe and then half my income. She refused with a firmness of purpose that could never have been her own. She had delivered an ultimatum and stuck to it."

The words were becoming easier now. They were gaining life from his use of them; they carried weight—and warmth. He had thrust into the background both bewilderment and resentment. He could not understand her, but he had the wisdom to demand first that she should understand him.

"I have told you something of my old life with her, Sylvia. You believed me, I think; you will believe me still in that respect, at least. In those old days she goaded me as near to hatred as I could get; meeting her again, on the day of Graunham's death, she completed my loathing of her. Yes, loathing; it's not too strong a word. The idea of returning to her—I can't describe it."

"And yet——" said Sylvia, low and bitter. He did not grasp her thought.

"And yet I went," he continued. "But wait! First I asked for time. I put the matter to Bayliss as I daresay you know—indirectly. He took counsel's opinion upon it. There was a certain amount of doubt about it, of course. About that point I began to want to discuss it all with you. I wanted you to share the doubt. But I wouldn't let myself tell you. I thought that you would certainly urge me to fight the case. And if I fought and lost, you and the boy would have paid the bill; for there was no compromise as far as

Mrs. Brierly was concerned. She would not have divorced me. I should have remained her husband—I should never have been yours as long as she lived.”

Sylvia’s face was in a veiling shadow. Corbeyne watched the locked hands. He saw them grip and relax, grip and relax, till the white fingers flushed red.

“I did not think that you would necessarily have refused to pay the bill. Indeed, in my crass egotism I believed that you might prefer to face the scandal of a technically anomalous position rather than lose our—life together. But I was not sure how Michael’s position would affect you. I hesitated—and then, if you remember, you told me, without knowing the full import of what you said.”

“Yes. I remember. I remembered—after you’d—gone.”

“You told me that you would hate me if any action of mine were to cast a slur upon our child. If I had fought Katherine and lost, there would have been a slur upon the child. It seemed to me that if you grew to hate me for such a reason—against your own will, as it were—it would hurt you terribly. Better to hate me whole-heartedly, conventionally, I had almost said. With the child safe, and the world with you, you could have despised me until you forgot me. It seemed better so. . . .”

Corbeyne leant heavily against the mantelshelf. His eyes, too, were upon the smouldering logs that smelt so sweet.

“If you will accept that basis and will try for a moment to put yourself in my place, as it was then, I would be interested to know what you would have done. . . . That’s a little ridiculous. I would like to know what you think any sane, morally balanced man would have done in the circumstances. To fight it out was impossible. To stand still was impossible. I toyed with the idea of telling you I was going on a

bachelor holiday and then going to live with her in the sense in which she had stipulated and doing all I could to upset her case. I dismissed that. I didn't wish to tell you that I was with men friends when I was really with a woman, whatever the circumstances. I preferred to tell you the whole-hog downright lie that I was infatuated. In other words, as the result of your own expressed views, I came to the conclusion that you would rather I ended our life together than hang a millstone about the neck of our child. Tell me, please, wherein I behaved wrongly? Tell me what a wiser and better man would have done in those circumstances?"

It seemed an age before she answered. He peered at her trying to read her expression. The bewilderment and resentment were leaping within him again. To him his actions seemed—on his premises—wholly justified. Where did she find the flaw in the chain? Upon what grounds did she base her assumption that he had learnt to love his captivity?

"You are defending yourself against a charge I have never made," she said at last. "I have no comment at all to make on what you have said."

No comment! Then what—why? Thoughts slithered into silence.

"It's so hard to make you understand that I consider your—desertion of me absolutely right," she was continuing. "Inevitably, I wish you had discussed it with me first, but you're quite right in saying that I should have advised you to fight. I should. Only, if you had lost I should never have hated you. Oh, I know I said I would—in ignorance of the circumstances; but I don't think—in any case, it would be absurd for me to blame you for taking a step which was meant merely to save Michael and spare me—other things. I honour you for that, for going away, in the way you did. I suppose I am flattering myself if I say that it seems to me a magnificent sacrifice. But——"

The door was flung open. Sylvia cut off her speech and turned. Carfax hurled himself into the room.

He ignored Sylvia and strode up to Corbeyne.

"You double-faced old scoundrel, shake hands!" he exploded.

CHAPTER XLV

THE INVITATION

CORBEYNE grinned and took the hand. He knew he was grinning and gripping Carfax's hand with the right amount of enthusiasm, and his mind swung back to that moment when he had believed he never need make small-talk again. Odd that he had been so exultantly sure that everything was to be happy ever after, and now here he was, with Sylvia still unfathomed, unapproached, pumping Carfax's arm and saying something to the effect that he was terribly sorry, but had not been able to help himself.

"Pah! Don't talk about it yet! It's dangerous. Half an hour ago I honestly believed I was going to kill you." Carfax turned to Sylvia. "As for you, I made up my mind on the way here that I would call you a minx. Minx!"

Sylvia, leaning forward a little in the firelight, turned grave eyes upon him.

"You told me once, Guardy, not so very long ago, that if ever I laughed at you you'd forgive me as long as I wasn't the subject of the laugh."

"I know that," said Carfax. "Managed to save that from getting mixed up with the subconsciousness. That's why I let it go at 'minx'." He snatched at her hand, squeezed it awkwardly and let it fall back into her lap. Sylvia switched on a reading-lamp on a table beside her.

"Well, now that you've summed it all up you can sit down," she said. Her little laugh grated on Corbeyne, but Carfax beamed.

"Can't spare a minute——"

"Scones," said Sylvia. "Tea which you only drink in this house. And this is an apple-wood fire. Doesn't it smell nice?"

"Well I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Carfax as he seated himself. "It's all this German philosophy stuff. Projection of the subconsciousness and all that. I bought up all the books on the subject. Piles of them. Made Miss Wood read 'em and give me a report. Heady stuff. No good getting mixed up with that kind of thing. When one once lets one's subconsciousness get the better of one, one——" He broke off and gasped.

"Try it with 'you,' dear," advised Sylvia, busy with the cups. "Never commit yourself to 'one' at the beginning of a long sentence."

"Ah! Take it as read, then," said Carfax. "What I mean is I'd have known at once—I *did* know at once—and I'd have gone on knowing if that German patter of yours hadn't put me on my guard against knowing anything. Phew! Never mind me. That's settled." Then, with an amazing confusion of thought: "Look at the people we've deceived!"

Sylvia laughed quite naturally this time.

"There, there," she soothed. "You just leave it alone, Guardy, and it'll untangle itself in time."

Corbeyne, standing outside the golden ring of lamplight in which Sylvia and Carfax laughed and chatted, drew further back against the mantelshelf. It was good just to watch her, unwatched himself. He might be given nothing more than that to remember in the days to come. . . . If only he could discover why her faith in him had snapped! . . . Carfax had paused in manipulating a scone.

"Did you know him from the first—that day in the Cardinal?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes. But——"

"Look here, Sylvia—you don't mean you were pulling my leg the night we both got this chap's letters?"

Sylvia flinched at that. Corbeyne saw it from his outer darkness, and saw also that she instinctively turned towards him for help; that she turned away from Carfax's affectionate kindness, from her own self-mastery, to the strength of the man in whom she had lost faith. It was but for a breath that she faltered, but to Corbeyne it brought a savage satisfaction.

"Can't we leave it, Carfax?" he asked. "You've been good enough to accept my apology." He saw that Sylvia had recovered.

"John had good reasons—which I thoroughly endorse—for making me think he was doing just what he said he was doing," she said deliberately. "Pressure was put upon him to which he was bound to yield."

"All that fake divorce stuff!" snorted Carfax. "He ought to have come to me. I'd have put him right. Pig-headed johnny! Always was! Sorry if I've put my foot in it, my dear."

He turned his attention to Corbeyne.

"Well, it seems as though you're through the wood," he said briskly. "All you've got to do now is to sit tight until you're bored with the job and then retire into the Upper House. Your department won't need me any longer. Phew! but you had a narrow shave, my boy. Nothing could have saved you. Seems to me you'd have been in it up to the neck if Sylvia hadn't dragged you out."

Corbeyne's mind was still busy with Sylvia's moment of weakness. It had rallied him wonderfully. That little appealing half-gesture to him—he reconstructed it greedily. He assented vaguely when Carfax said Sylvia had dragged him out. He didn't follow the remark, but with Jim——

"Oh, quite," he said.

"*'Quite'!*" said Carfax, wagging his head at him. "Mind you don't gush, old man! Your lawyer's beaten, and your detective's beaten, and you're beaten. Sylvia steps in, finds Brierly for you, sends the Wool Combine to the right-about, and all you've got to say about it is '*Quite!*'"

Corbeyne stopped breathing and gaped at Carfax.

"Can't quite swallow that, eh?" ranted Carfax. "Try to get this much. You and Rason and Bayliss all stopped dead at Shrager. Deagle had squared him and nothing on earth would budge him—except Sylvia. She spotted from the Ealing lady's tale that there must have been a real Mr. Brierly—silk johnny. Could Rason find him? Sylvia found him. Sylvia went to Lord Henry Graunham's people, followed an elaborate clue about a pass book while Rason laughed at her. Neither she nor anybody else could get at the fellow—till she went to Blenkiron and wangled him—yes, minx, wangled him!—into setting every bank clerk in the country looking for a particular signature. Then she confronted him with Shrager, and Shrager had to admit that Brierly was the man he had identified as Graunham. Weeks of work with every discouragement from the professionals, and you say '*Quite.*'"

Lord Carfax finished with a snort. Corbeyne was looking at Sylvia. Her hands were clenched again and he knew that Carfax had blurted out the truth. He chose his words carefully.

"As a matter of fact, Carfax, Sylvia has been extremely secretive about her part in the affair. While I was getting on with the job she settled the problem. She pulled my leg, too. I'm afraid I was ungallant enough to take it for granted that the detective had done all the work."

Sylvia smiled brilliantly into his part of the room.

"You two!" exclaimed Carfax. "Just the same as

ever! Tchah! Well! if this little how-d'ye-do hasn't rubbed the gilt off the gingerbread, nothing will. By the way, John, if you've finished with those chambers of yours, I'll take them off your hands. I know a man they'd just suit."

"I'm hanging on to them for the present," said Corbeyne, watching Sylvia's smile waver. "People keep coming. And they enable me to keep this place free from shop."

Carfax finished his tea, rose and blew loudly.

"What a Session! Thank the Lord it's only got another week to run. I shall be glad to get out of Town. Unless you two are going off for another honeymoon, come down to Carfax and bring the boy. Eh, Sylvia!"

"Very nice, Guardy. I—may we leave it open for a few days?"

"Right ho! Send a wire any time. Must buzz off. Tons to do. Thank the Lord everything's all right now!"

CHAPTER XLVI

THE HOUSE IS REBUILT

THE door closed behind Carfax.
“Would you mind going on at the point at which you left off?” asked Corbeyne elaborately. “You broke off, if I remember rightly, at ‘but.’”

The interruption of Carfax’s visit, he felt, had strengthened him. That fraction of a second in which Sylvia had needed his covering shield while she regained her poise, had given him a foothold. As yet, nothing else! Possibly the new ring in his voice told Sylvia that he would not easily surrender the little he had gained, for her shining head was stiffly held. She had risen and faced him.

“What I would have said must be obvious to you.”

“I thoroughly assure you that it is not,” said Corbeyne doggedly. “You had just endorsed my action. You were good enough to say, I think, that you honoured me. Then you said ‘but.’ I am simply requesting to be told the point at which your disapproval begins.”

“I do not presume to approve or disapprove. I am simply stating that as far as my own feelings are concerned I imagine that a divorce with your consent would be the easiest way out of our difficulties.”

Corbeyne contemplated her. In the days which she and he had spent together so long ago, he had

sometimes thought that there was the suggestion of a rapier about her; the gleam of steel, its keen swift sureness, its hardness even, had all lurked in her beauty, even then. Now he saw the rapier in her and nothing else. What she had endured from pride and loneliness during the last three months had blotted away the lovely joy of life in her and left her a brilliant woman who, merely as a regrettable lapse, could appeal to a man for mental or moral reinforcement.

Corbeyne, gazing into her steel-blue eyes, hardened to her hardness. He would make her herself again—force her step by step back to her old tenderness, her old delight—or he would break her with himself.

“In the face of my explanation, then,” he said, “you believe that I was speaking the truth when I wrote you that I was leaving you for another woman?”

She lifted her eyebrows.

“Oh, no! I believe everything that you have said about your motives for leaving.”

“Ah. Then you believe that my—er—infatuation was born of association with the lady during the time I spent under her roof at Ealing? On general principles I again admit that is not unreasonable. My vanity is a little staggered at the thought of your applying general principles to this case—I had hoped that your knowledge of me would have led you to a different conclusion. You used to understand me pretty thoroughly, Sylvia.”

He was intensely watchful of her. He watched the finely moulded upper lip; it did not tremble. It did not move at all.

“It’s difficult to speak of this, even to you,” he drove on, “but the most twisted part of it all is that you might so easily be right. She—Katherine—would have been willing to accept me again as a lover. She allowed me to see that she would. My lack of response added to the miseries of the position.”

“You maintain that you never did respond?”

"I once——"

"Ah!"

"No. Wait." His voice was like ice. "I once held her in my arms. I was going to kiss her. I would have kissed her—you see how I am giving you your weapons!—but something distracted my attention. . . . Your laughter tells me you don't believe that. If you knew more of a man's nature you would realise that that confession is true just because it is lame. She had been nagging for hours, and I had sunk so low that a little lower seemed not to matter. I did not think I should ever see you again. So—— And then, as I tell you, something distracted my attention. Something I saw in a newspaper. I forgot all about her. Well, you don't believe it. That's where, for all your strength, Sylvia, you are a fool. Katherine, in your place, would believe it, because she knows something of men."

She whitened at that, her eyes and lips blazing their colour at him.

"I know that men divide their minds into compartments and their natures, too. I understand many compartments of yours. I thought I understood all. I believe now that I did not. I believe that Katherine touched a side of you I never saw—called it into being, if you like; and that therefore she has a claim upon you. I can accept easily that a newspaper would make you forget her, for a moment, just as the discovery of her intrigues has made you anxious to forget her now altogether. Therefore——"

He changed his tactics slightly.

"Doesn't your sense of decency tell you the thing's absurd?"

"Innumerable wives think that of faithless husbands."

Break her—he would break her for that, as she had broken him. A terrible anger against her rose in him, crossed by his longing for her as she used to be

and his hatred of life that had brought them, at the journey's end, to this.

"Don't misunderstand me," said Sylvia proudly. "I do not accuse you of putting another in my place. In that sense, I know you have always been faithful to me. In that sense your very anger with me now tells me that you always will be—the you as I know you. I meant that the fact that there is that other side of you that can be lured by a woman whom you despise——"

"Lured!" grimaced Corbeyne. "The most incredible part to me, Sylvia, is that you should bring this accusation against me, based solely on some psychological half-truth, when apparently you have with the greatest ease routed my enemies for me. I—er—I fear I have neglected to express my thanks for that."

"I don't want your thanks. I am sorry Jim let anything out. Feeling as you do towards me now I know that that knowledge hurts you, and I don't want to hurt you in that way. I was lucky. I investigated the matter and I guessed, and my guesses came off. That is all, really. You need not feel indebted to me. It was no more than a little energy in our partnership to save the Ministry."

"Thanks, but please don't let that bother you," he slashed back at her. "It really does not distress me. In the last three months I think I have lost the power of being humiliated. The knowledge that my own strength was insufficient for my enemies, and that it was a woman who routed them crushes me now no more than my classification with the faithless husbands simply because you have a theory as to the nature of man."

"I don't take my stand on a theory." Sylvia was slipping, slipping towards abandonment of self-control. Her every laboured word drove her nearer to the edge. "I've seen two of Katherine's friends—Mrs. Pelt and Mrs. Tuckey. They told me that while

you were with her—— And then I went to see her for the second time—I would not take her word for anything; but her whole manner, her every gesture, made me believe her statement that she has a claim upon you which your honour will admit, however distasteful her presence may have become to you. A claim——”

Corbeyne's anger rushed up in him like a fire and then was extinguished. While she had held to her accusation of him through pique, as he thought, or some strange, steady blindness, he could rage against her for throwing the precious moments away to lie rotting on the débris of the past three months. But now—now he saw; he saw, at least, that he had been wise when he feared, three months ago, that Katherine would defeat Sylvia if they crossed swords. He tried to imagine the meeting. They had met, and Katherine had cheated and won. A clever cheat! No, far more probably a very crude and blatant cheat, for Sylvia's wits could outsoar any other woman's. Sylvia would have been alert for subtleties, snares. Katherine had kept to a trail so obvious that Sylvia had passed it by.

“It's very surprising, Sylvia. Katherine told you that. Those other unspeakable women told you that. I myself deny it. You have to balance my word against the word of those women. Do you believe them in preference to me?”

“Yes.”

“Why, Sylvia?”

“I believe that a man will lie on such a subject—any man—the best of men.”

Corbeyne laughed. His hand went to his breast pocket and closed on the letter of Katherine's which Deagle had left with him—Deagle's tribute of chivalry. Corbeyne produced the latter in its envelope.

“I care nothing for your generalisations, nothing. You believe that I made love to Mrs. Brierly. Here,

in this letter in her handwriting is conclusive proof that I did not."

The cry that came from her sent the blood pounding to his head. He could not be sure, afterwards, whether she spoke his name or moved towards him. He could remember only that she stretched out her hand and that, laughing, he denied her the right to prove his pledge, and the frenzy within him burnt itself out in that denial.

"The best of men will lie on such a subject, you say, my wife. I do not aspire to that company. Let us say that a faithless husband will lie upon such a subject. But let us be consistent, Sylvia. If I lie to you in saying that I have not been intimate with that woman since I divorced her, you must consistently suppose that I lie when I say that this contains the proof that I have not been intimate with her.

"I told you that I thought I had lost the power of being humiliated. I find that I have not. I find that I still shrink from the humiliation of proving my words to you. You will have to go on believing that I lied when I said that this letter contains conclusive proof."

He bent down to the hearth. The heat of the fire scorched his hand as he held the letter to the flames, held it until it burned down to his fingers.

The firelight dazzled him. As he straightened he could not see her, but he knew she was still there by the big chair, he could hear her tempestuous breath, he could picture her clutching hands.

"Good-bye," he said, and turned to the door.

She was there before him, both hands behind her holding the door-knob fast. At the look on her face his heart shook within him.

"John, I believe you. John, if you will forgive——"

He had demanded that her gold and ivory pride should crumble away and give her back to him. He saw the miracle. He saw her tremulous passion of remorse. . . .

"It is a little late in the day," he said thickly. "Who is it that now believes me? You have revealed that I am a stranger to you, and in so doing you have become a stranger to me."

"John!"

He heard her voice break with tears, and yet it came as if through the roar of waters, entreating him to know that he was whisking them both to destruction. He pressed onward to the brink, driven by his old idealisation of her.

"Do not tell yourself that I am piqued and angry at a false accusation. I swear to you that I feel no anger—merely a sense of nakedness. Everything has been stripped from me, even the power to mourn my loss."

"I love you." Her hands were pleading with him, the whole vibrant force of her cried its surrender. "I love you."

"Yes. Strangely enough I know that. I have known it for twenty seconds. Do I love you? I can't tell—I have nothing to tell with. I have held you in a shrine. My passionate love of you was the sacramental expression of my will to merge myself in something higher than myself. I saw you—Cæsar's wife—above suspicion—of her husband!"

Abruptly she quieted herself. Tears hung on her lashes and trembled there as she closed her eyes, leaning back against the door. In the long pause Corbeyne could only be aware of those soft long lashes and their shadows. . . .

"How can I make you see, John? Every woman who is loved knows that the adoration she is given may well destroy her; but she daren't cast it aside. I tried so hard. . . . Can't you see? I wanted you to love me, not to look up to me. I can love you, John, as never before. You have let me come down from the pedestal—you have released me from the shrine that was a prison." The long lashes rose

revealing the gifts her eyes held for him. "I adore you for that. My—soul kneels before you—Cæsar."

Corbeyne reached out a hand and pulled her away from the door. Still tugging at her, as though they were children at play, he came back to the sweet-smelling welcoming fire.

"Somehow we've blundered on a truth, Sylvia. Cæsar—this shrine and pedestal business—the projection of my own idealised egotism! Cæsar! Cæsar saved by a woman from the clutches of a wanton and a crook. Good Lord! I've been adoring myself all these years. Damn Cæsar! Will you be John Corbeyne's wife?"

"Yes, please," said Sylvia.

"And we cut out the adoration game? On both sides?"

"No. I must be allowed to adore."

"What?"

"Your strength. Go on holding me as you are now. You're loving me. You'd be torn in pieces for me. But you're grinding my bones and crushing my muscles. And you don't know it because you're so beautifully strong."

"Whatever happens we won't start fresh," said Corbeyne some minutes later. "We'll go on from where we left off and cut out all idealism and we'll never be romantic. None of that 'living happily ever afterwards' stunt. We'll positively cultivate miseries and bother and embarrassments. I'll demand damages of *The Plain Man* and I'll prosecute Deagle."

"To prove that you are not a—faithless statesman?" asked Sylvia.

"That's clever!" admired Corbeyne. "I'll drop it—and Deagle shall be the first one to make a profit out of the 'no romanticism' campaign. Very daring of you to say that to me since we patched up our lives on that phrase! But for God's sake go on being as impudent as you can."

"Yes, I will. Come up and box with the Jobber, John. He's been teaching me lately, but I've rather disappointed him, I'm afraid. He said 'poor muvver!' every time he hit me, in fact he patronised me blatantly."

"I'll take him down a peg or two! Lord, I could fight the world! Come on."

THE END



